



102: Searching For Your Heart by cali-chan

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Max M., Mike W., Will B.

Pairings: Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-11-10 10:35:42

Updated: 2018-12-21 11:47:39

Packaged: 2019-12-12 23:18:04

Rating: T

Chapters: 7

Words: 61,162

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: One of the world's biggest action movie superstars is coming to town, and every kid in Hawkins High is determined to win the scavenger hunt and get a face-to-face meeting with their idol. Mike and his friends are sure they've got this in the bag— until the contest throws a wrench in their plans and their only shot at winning is partnering up with Mike's longtime crush, El Hopper.

1. The Setup

Searching For Your Heart, The Setup. PG-13, romance/fluff/friendship, no-powers AU, Mike/Eleven.

One of the world's biggest action movie superstars is coming to town, and every kid in Hawkins High is determined to win MTV's back-to-school scavenger hunt and get a face-to-face meeting with their idol. Mike and his friends are sure they've got this in the bag— until the contest throws a wrench in their plans and their only shot at winning is partnering up with Mike's longtime crush, El Hopper.

Note: The clues for the Scavenger Hunt are actual clues (well, except for the ones relating to Brock Sorenson because those are obviously just made up). You might get a kick out of them if you're into trivia or that kind of stuff— be sure to let me know in a comment if you solve them before the kids do here!

Note 2: This is a high-school AU where Eleven doesn't have her powers, but it still takes place in the 80s because the internet would make it way too easy, lol. xD

Note 3: Happy **Mileven Week 2018**, everyone! This is for theme #5: First Date. The theme doesn't make an appearance in this chapter yet, but I promise it'll come up in some way in the future! Despite my being one of the organizers of Mileven Week, I am actually terrible at writing on prompt (I know, I fail so hard) so my best bet was to sort of reverse-engineer this one to fit the theme. You'll definitely see it in here soon!

.

.

"OhmyGodohmyGodohmyGodohmyGodohmyGodohmyGodohmyGodohmyG

Heart in his throat, Jim Hopper dropped the mug he was washing right into the kitchen sink and with his hands still wet rushed straight to his daughter's bedroom, praying to any deity who could hear his thoughts that he wouldn't find her sprawled on the floor in a pool of

her own blood or something equally terrifying. "What?! Are you okay?! What's wrong?!" he asked frantically as he reached El's door, his mind running through every worst-case scenario in what felt like a second.

Thankfully, he didn't find her in pain or suffering in any way—instead, she was jumping ecstatically on her bed, obviously *very* happy about something. "Brock Sorenson is coming to Hawkins!" she squealed when she saw him standing in her doorway, waving her arms as if to underscore how excited this fact made her.

Hopper, who had no idea who she was talking about and was still trying to flush his mind of the gruesome images his overprotective brain had so generously provided for him a minute ago, could only respond: "...Huh?"

El stopped jumping and let herself fall down in a sitting position down on the bed, the mattress making her bounce a little as she did so. "MTV is doing a 'Back to School' contest where they choose one high school to get a special visit from Brock Sorenson, action movie superstar, and out of every school in the country they chose Hawkins High, so now the team that actually wins the contest gets to meet him face to face!"

She said all of this in what looked like one breath, so fast that Hopper wondered how she didn't run out of air halfway through. She didn't seem to be particularly affected, though, as she let herself fall back on the bed with a swoon. "He's so dreamy! Max is, like, *obsessed* with him."

Before Hopper could even get a word in edgewise, she pushed herself up to a sitting position again, looking at him with wide eyes. "Oh man, I have to call Max. She's gonna *freak*!" She quickly got to her feet and rushed past Hopper to pick up the living room phone, which had the longest cord out of all the phones in the house so she always used it like it was her own personal line.

Hopper simply watched her as she scurried about, brown curls bouncing against her shoulders as she ran back to her room, and then for all of his concern, he found himself with a door slammed right in his face as the teenager hurried to call her best friend and tell her the

big news.

And so Jim, who only understood about half of what El had rattled off about when it came to this contest thing, could only grumble to himself— "What kind of a name is Brock Sorenson, anyway?"— as he made his way back to the kitchen to finish washing his coffee mug.

.

.

.

Lucas, Mike, and Will watched in amusement as Dustin sprinted out the main entrance to Hawkins High, his bag bouncing against his back as he sped out of the building. As he made his way toward the corner of the parking lot where they were waiting for him, he was waving a paper flyer in his left hand.

"So?" Lucas asked when Dustin finally made it to where they were standing. "Did you get it?"

Rather than handing them the paper, Dustin panted and bent over, leaning his weight on his knees while gesturing with his free hand in the universal sign for "wait a second." He seemed to be really out of breath from running all the way from the Guidance Counselor's office to the parking lot— which, really, was completely unnecessary. He could've just walked.

"Dustin?" Will tried again, sounding more entertained than worried.

"Will you quit it with the theatrics already and just show us the flyer?" Lucas finally had enough of his friend's stalling and reached out to take the piece of paper from Dustin's grip, but Dustin slapped his hand away.

"Gimme a break, I had to squeeze my way past Bobby Hastings to get out of Ms. Tanaka's office," he declared, still struggling with his oxygen intake as he spoke. "Okay, here's how it's going to work." He brought the flyer in his hand up so everybody could see what it said. "We'll be given five clues which lead to five objects in five specific, different locations in Hawkins. We have to solve the first clue, take a

Polaroid of the correct object, and bring it back to Ms. Tanaka before she hands us the next clue."

He handed the flyer to Will, who reached for it first. "The first team to hand her all five photos of the correct answers will get the face-to-face with Brock Sorenson. If no team gets it right by Homecoming, then they'll choose one team at random for the VIP meet-and-greet."

"All right," said Mike, following along with his explanation. "Sounds good so far. What are the clues about?"

Dustin continued speaking as Lucas moved to the side so he could read the flyer over Will's shoulder. "Academics. At least the part of it that tells us what objects we have to look for. The first subject is math," he added, signaling to the flyer with a wave of his hand.

"Cool, so we shouldn't have much of a problem with that," Mike said, starting to feel enthusiastic about this whole thing. They were good when it came to academics— all their Science Fair trophies more than enough proof of their nerd credentials— and even if there was anything they couldn't individually figure out, between the four of them they'd get to the bottom of it. That was the way it had always been with their classes, and he saw no reason for this to be any different.

"Yes, *except...*" Dustin paused for effect as Mike rolled his eyes at him and gestured for him to keep going. "The second part of the clue, the part that tells us the location of the object, is not an academic question. It's a question about Brock Sorenson."

"So? That should be a piece of cake for you, right? You've seen all his movies," Mike threw back, not understanding why Dustin was making such a big deal of this.

They were all huge Brock Sorenson fans. His usual fare wasn't really what they gravitated to— he was more of an action movie lead than anything else— but he had also starred in the *Wizard for Hire* movie, which, as far as the boys were concerned, was the closest thing they would ever get to a real-life D&D movie. It was rumored that there were going to be sequels, and the franchise possibilities immediately catapulted Sorenson to idol level as far as the four of them were

concerned.

Dustin was the most invested out of all of them, having gone back to watch his movies all the way back to his humble beginnings in cheap indie fare. He had a poster of Brock Sorenson in his room (right beside his prized Charles Darwin *Origin of Species* illustration) and swore to everyone who would listen that Brock Sorenson was going to be the next Harrison Ford. They were all huge fans, hence their wanting to participate in this contest, but none of them could beat Dustin as far as sheer enthusiasm was concerned.

"Sure, but turns out the questions aren't about his movies—"

"They're questions about his life," Will intervened, having finally finished reading the flyer with the instructions and the first clue. He waved the piece of paper toward Mike. "Look at this: 'Where was Brock Sorenson discovered?'" He shook his head. "This sounds like the kind of thing you'd find in girls' gossip magazines."

"Yeah, and I don't know *anything* about that," Dustin was quick to point out with a disappointed shrug.

"So what are you saying, then?" Lucas asked with a frown, crossing his arms disgruntledly. Mike knew he'd been looking forward to doing this. "We just give up? You were the one hyping us up to do this contest thing in the first place!"

"Hell no!" Dustin exclaimed suddenly, so loudly that a group of seniors walking past them gave them the stink eye. "Are you kidding? If we win a face-to-face with Brock Sorenson, we'd be the coolest people in school!"

"We'd be the coolest people in the *county*," Mike corrected him, not that it made much of a difference; the possibility of moving a few rungs up on the school's social ladder was appealing, for sure, but Mike knew deep down they all just wanted to win this so they could meet their idol. It would be the coolest experience of their lives. "But then how do we do this?"

"I think what Dustin's trying to say," Will was the first one to put two and two together out loud, "is that we're going to have to team up

with someone. Someone who knows more about this kinda stuff than we do."

"No, it's even worse than that," Dustin declared, in a tone so serious you'd think he was a second away from revealing he had less than three months to live. "We're going to have to team up with a *girl*."

The four boys sighed.

It wasn't that they had anything against girls. They liked girls and would like to have girls like them, but they were acutely aware of their utter inability to interact with girls in any fashion that did not lead to them making complete idiots out of themselves. Dustin tried way too hard, whereas Will was either too shy to try at all, or completely uninterested. Lucas had the most game out of the four by far, having even gone as far as making out with a few girls here and there, but when it came to actual relationships he was about as clueless as the other three.

Mike was usually able to talk to girls when it came to school projects and such, but apart from that he tended to avoid them, always feeling like they were judging him. Save for the one girl he'd been pining over since the seventh grade—whom he still hadn't plucked up the courage to ask out even after five years of saying hi to each other in the hallways and some occasional small talk—he didn't really have any inclination to deal with girls on a regular basis. He found most girls their age to be vapid and superficial, and he didn't want to deal with that if he could help it.

Except Dustin was right: now they would have to. But maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe he could look at this scavenger hunt as sort of like a school project, something he needed to get a good grade on, and that would make it easier to have to interact with some girl he didn't know. Just go in, solve the clues, win the meet-and-greet with Brock Sorenson, and then never have to talk to the girl in question again. It couldn't be that hard, right?

"Do you think there are even girls who want to meet Brock Sorenson?" Dustin wondered suddenly, breaking Mike away from his thoughts. "His movies don't seem like the kind girls usually like."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "What would you know? The only girl you routinely hang out with is your mother."

"Oh, right, like Erica's much of a difference—"

"I think some girls out there *must* like his movies," Will intervened before an argument sparked up. "I mean, Brock is really gorgeous, after all." Three pairs of eyes framed by raised eyebrows turned his way, and Will blushed, realizing what he'd just said. "Uh, or so I'm told," he mumbled, making the other three chuckle.

"I'm with Will. There's gotta be at least one girl out there who's thinking of participating in this contest. We just gotta pay attention." An idea suddenly crossed Mike's mind. "Hmm. Maybe we could ask El if she knows someone—"

"Jesus, Mike," Lucas cut him off with a groan, "I know you love her and stuff, but she's not literally the solution to our every problem—"

"I don't—" Mike caught himself before he said the word too loudly, but he was sure the flush in his cheeks was betraying him. "I don't love her, and hey, at least I'm throwing out some ideas here instead of waiting for the mountain to come to us. Why don't you ask your sister if she knows someone who's interested, huh?"

Lucas shook his head. "You know how she is, if I ask her for a simple favor she'll be on my case for the rest of my life and there is no way I'm putting myself in her grasp like that." Mike didn't doubt that it would be that bad. While he had two sisters of his own— one too old to care about this contest and the other one too young to understand it— Lucas had Erica, who was close enough to their age that she could possibly help them if she wanted to but who also happened to be the spawn of Satan, no offense to Lucas's parents. There was no way she would help them— not without extracting some heavy blackmail material from them in return, at least.

"I think Mike's right, though," Will called out, giving Mike a small smile as if thanking him for taking his side earlier. "El could help. I have art class with her, I could ask her then," he offered. Even though Mike had an embarrassingly obvious crush on El Hopper, Will was actually the one out of the four of them who knew her best. His

mother and her father were old friends, so they had dinner at each other's houses every once in a while.

They weren't close enough to run in the same circles at school, but they were friendly with each other in a way that, frankly, made Mike a little jealous. What he wouldn't give to be able to talk to El as often as Will did! But no, whenever *he* got the chance to talk to her in any significant capacity, he ended up babbling about video games or D&D or some other random topic she probably didn't give two shits about. *Way to go, Wheeler.*

"Okay, fine, ask El if she knows someone who can help," Dustin finally conceded, shaking his head. "But I reserve the right to veto anyone who's ever made fun of my teeth in the past," he added strongly, and the others decided to let him have that.

After agreeing that they would go to Mike's after their A/V Club meeting the next day to start working on the math problems together, they all piled up into Mike's car and headed home for the day, already excited about possibly winning this thing and getting to meet their favorite celebrity.

.

.

.

"It's like this whole thing is in Chinese!" Max growled at the piece of paper she had slapped in front of her on El's dinner table. This was also about a minute after she declared that the flyer was *mocking* her, so El was starting to get the idea that Max wasn't too thrilled about their first clue having to be solved with math.

"They're just first-order equations," she tried to mollify her friend, pulling the flyer a little toward her so she could point to the clue with her finger. "They're just a little bit more difficult than the ones we had in algebra class. Look, there's only one quadratic equation."

Her attempts at making her friend feel better clearly failed because Max huffed. "Yeah, well, I had enough trouble with the ones we got

in algebra class," she reminded El pointedly, and El couldn't refute that. Max was super smart, but academics weren't her forte—math in particular—so it was understandable that she was disappointed when she saw that the possibility of meeting her celebrity crush was entirely dependent on her academic prowess. "Are you sure you can solve these?"

"I think so," El retorted. She had always done well in math, and she thought with some effort she could solve the equations given to them on the flyer. There was only one problem, though... "The thing is, I can't be sure if my answers are correct. They obviously don't give out the answers for us to check our work as our algebra textbook did, and I don't want to risk submitting something that might be wrong."

"They'd send us back to start from scratch, and we can't afford to waste time like that," Max agreed with a nod. "So what do we do?"

"Well..." El started carefully as she pulled out the chair beside Max's and sat down, all the way looking down at the piece of paper on the table rather than at her friend. "I was thinking, if I could have someone to compare my answers with, someone who's good at math, we'd have more of a certainty that we got them all right. So, we could team up with someone," she suggested, then bit her lip. "You know, Will and his friends are fans of Brock Sorenson..."

"Oh, here we go," Max interrupted with a sigh as she crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair, giving El a knowing look.

El immediately found herself squirming under her gaze. "What?" she asked defensively.

Max's smug expression did not falter a bit. "You just want to team up with Will's little nerd friends because you have a gigantic crush on Mike Wheeler," she declared, straight to the point, so bluntly that El's jaw dropped.

"I do not have a crush on Mike Wheeler!" she retorted immediately, which was kind of true. Kind of. Like, she thought he was cute, sure. And smart. And super nice. But that didn't mean she had a *crush* on him, right? She just thought he was a nice guy. Just like Will.

Except she didn't think of Will nearly as much as she thought about Mike and, okay, maybe she had a *little* bit of a crush on him. Just a tiny, inconsequential one. That she'd held onto... for five years. That was normal, right? These things happened.

Max clearly would *not* agree with that self-assessment, as she scoffed at her almost straight away. "Child, please," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Don't act like I don't see you staring at him every time he's around. You're way too obvious."

El was sure that she was blushing all the way to the tips of her ears. "Yeah, well, it's not my fault he happens to come into my field of vision so often," she threw back and *God*, even to her own ears that sounded pathetic. "He's really tall, you know."

"Right, it's because he's so tall," Max retorted in a tone that suggested she wasn't buying what El was selling. She uncrossed her arms and leaned forward, balancing her weight on her forearms against the table. "Ellie, how long have we been best friends?"

El leaned back in her chair with a huff of her own. "Four years," she mumbled grumpily, knowing that Max had her number, and there was no changing that. Yeah, okay, she did have a gigantic crush on Mike Wheeler. She always had, since her first week of school back in seventh grade when she was paired with him for a History project and he'd been so nice to her.

She had never been in public school before that. She hadn't even met Max at that point, and she was terrified of having to interact with the other kids, but Mike had been so understanding, so helpful, that she couldn't help but fall a little for him right there, and the feeling stayed with her through the years. They didn't interact very often—they ran in different circles, plus El was too shy and always tried her hardest not to let those feelings show, but Max was right: her eyes were always immediately drawn to him whenever he was nearby, and eventually someone was bound to notice.

And Max *had* noticed, alright. "I think it's cute that you think you can get something like this past me," she said, entirely too smug, and El almost wanted to retort something sarcastic—except she knew *Well, don't count yourself as some super sleuth if it took you four whole years to*

figure it out would just be confirming her suspicions, and she couldn't bring herself to do that just yet.

Her redheaded friend exhaled, her smug expression relaxing into an understanding smile. "You don't need an excuse to talk to him, you know," she pointed out in a supportive tone. "Just go up to him and strike up a conversation—"

"It's not an excuse, Max," El interrupted her, still sounding entirely too defensive to her ears, but she couldn't help it; she just wanted them to get off this topic right away. "We really do need to team up with someone. And Will and his friends, they're really smart. You know they are. They've won the science fair how many times over the past few years?" Max remained silent, and El knew that she couldn't contradict anything she just said. They did need the help.

Then, an idea occurred to her, and she jumped at the chance to turn the tables on her mischievous friend. "Besides, if you're just opposed to this because you made out with Lucas Sinclair that one time at Jennifer's party—"

"Okay, fine, we'll team up with them," Max cut her off before she could finish the thought, and El mentally congratulated herself on touching a nerve for once. "But you're coming with me when we ask them," she added, signaling to El with her pointer finger.

"Sure, why wouldn't I?" El retorted with a triumphant smile. She could talk to Mike if she had to; she had done it before. She liked talking to him. She liked how excited he got about the things he loved. And she really did believe with their help, they could win this thing. So as far as she was concerned, this was a win-win situation. "Tomorrow at lunch, then?"

.

.

.

Mike was the last one in the party to get to their usual table during lunch the next day, and as he made his way there with his lunch tray,

he was surprised to see two unexpected people standing by the table talking to his friends: Max and El.

"What's up?" he asked as he came to stand beside them, and then, realizing that he was standing just a few inches away from his crush, the next words came out of his mouth unbidden: "Hi, El."

"Hi, Mike," she replied, giving him a small but adorable smile that made his stomach flutter.

"Hi, El," he repeated before his brain kicked in again to remind him that *You already said that, stupid*, and he had to shake himself out of his reverie to go back to the topic at hand. "So, uh, what's going on?" he asked again, genuinely curious as to what had drawn the girl of his dreams and her best friend to the unofficial nerd table.

"Um, we were just wondering if you guys are doing the Brock Sorenson thing," she said, moving her gaze from Mike to his three friends, who were all looking up at her curiously. That caught Mike by surprise. He would've imagined maybe one of them had a question about one of the classes they shared with them or something, or maybe that El wanted to ask Will something about their parents. Definitely not this, though.

"Actually, yeah," Will was the one to respond to her query. Dustin was too busy looking between the two girls, while Lucas was too busy looking everywhere but *at* the two girls. "We just got the first clue yesterday. Why do you ask?"

The girls exchanged a look before Max continued speaking. "We were wondering if you guys would like to team up with us," she said, surprising all four boys. "I'm shit at math, but El can try and solve the equations," she continued, throwing her hair over her shoulder. "The thing is that she needs someone to compare her answers to, to make sure they're right, and she thought you guys might be good for it."

"Well, we do need help with the pop culture questions," Will admitted with a shrug. "Would you guys be able to help us with that?"

El nodded and Max scoffed. "Oh, that's easy," she said dismissively. "I know everything about Brock Sorenson, and what I don't know, we

can figure out." Mike still had trouble imagining girls being Brock Sorenson fans, but Max certainly seemed sure of her superfan credentials. "Just leave that up to us."

"Wait, wait," Dustin chimed in, like he was just wrapping his head around the girls' suggestion. "You want to partner up with us for the Brock Sorenson contest?" His eyebrows were raised so high on his forehead that they disappeared under the brim of his red-white-and-blue hat. "Why?"

"Well, you guys are really smart," El intervened, a little unsure— not because she didn't believe what she was saying, Mike guessed, but because she wasn't expecting her intentions to be questioned.

"Hmm. This is true," Dustin conceded with a nod, sounding so much like one of the comically cliched ancient-wise-man characters from their superhero comic books that Mike had to roll his eyes. "I'll give you that. But how can we be sure that you won't just copy our answers and then screw us over?"

"*Dustin!*" Mike exclaimed with a glare, while Will was quick to give his curly-haired friend a slap on the arm. It's not that Mike didn't know where Dustin's suspicions were coming from; this wouldn't be the first time some popular kid pretended to be friends with one of them just to get them to do their homework for them. But still, this was El— beautiful, sweet, polite El— and Mike was 100% sure she would never do such a thing.

"But— we wouldn't do that," El stammered with wide eyes, obviously not having expected to be accused of cheating after offering a genuine, simple deal.

"Don't listen to him," Mike dismissed Dustin's insinuation with a wave of his hand, quick to give El a reassuring smile. "He's just being contrary for the sake of it. We'd love to partner up with you ladies."

El was just starting to smile back when Dustin intervened again. "Excuse me," he said, demanding everyone's attention back to him. "Party rules state that these kinds of decisions have to be put up to a vote. This is a democracy. I have a voice and I deserve to be heard," he added, tapping the table in front of him with a finger along with

his words.

Mike narrowed his eyes at him. "Well, Mr. Democracy, your voice is on its own because Will and I vote yes," he said, turning to Will with a congenial expression. "Right, Will?" His brown-haired friend nodded his head, throwing in his support for the idea.

In unison, the five teenagers turned toward Lucas, who had remained quiet through the entire conversation. "Lucas?" Mike prompted him, but the dark-skinned boy remained silent for a moment longer.

Lucas had been staring down at his food for a long while, his gaze only lifting now to fall on Max, who looked away as soon as their eyes met. Lucas's jaw clenched for a second before he looked down again. "Yeah, fine. Let's do it," he finally muttered, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair with a sigh.

Mike cheered internally. "Awesome," he said, turning to the two girls and giving them a bright, triumphant grin. "Guess that means we're partners, then."

"Partners," El echoed, smiling right back at him. Mike felt like he could start dancing, he was so excited. Thankfully, he managed to keep his feet planted firmly on the ground and save himself the embarrassment. "When did you guys want to start working on it? It should be as soon as possible; we don't want to risk any other teams out there solving the clue before we do."

"We were actually going to work on it today after A/V Club," Will let her know.

"Yeah," Mike agreed. "Do you think you guys can make it to my place, say around 4:30? We should be done by then," he explained, already internally freaking out at having the girl he'd been drooling over for years actually visit his house.

El turned to Max with a questioning look— Max was the one out of the two of them who actually had a car— and the redhead shrugged. "Sure, we'll be there," she asserted, obviously agreeing with El's assessment that they needed to hit the ground running with this scavenger-hunt thing.

"Maple Street, right?" El asked him, and his heart did a quick somersault when he realized that she knew where he lived. He couldn't remember her ever being to his place— her father, sure, but not her personally; he would've noticed that. Still, if she knew where he lived and kept it front-of-mind, that meant she was paying attention when someone around her talked about him or his family. That was something, at least.

Mike nodded to her question, and she seemed satisfied. "Okay. We'll bring reference materials, then. See you later," she said, giving him one last smile— and a wave for the rest of the boys— before turning on her heel and making her way to the table where she and Max usually had lunch. Max did the same, red her flying around her as she spun around and waved at them over her shoulder.

"What does she mean, 'reference materials'?" Lucas asked, almost to himself, as the two girls walked away from their table. Mike wasn't sure what it meant, either, but he was more preoccupied with his other friend as he put his tray down on the table and sat down.

Dustin yowled as Mike slapped his other arm angrily. "What the hell is your problem?" he demanded, glaring at his hat-wearing friend. "El has never said anything bad about your teeth. Where do you get off on, treating her like a criminal?"

"I don't think El has ever said anything bad about anyone, period," Will chimed in from Dustin's opposite side.

"It's not about my teeth or El," Dustin responded to Mike's question as he pushed his food tray, now empty of food, slightly away from him and toward the center of the table. "It's about you. Do you know how important this is? Meeting Brock Sorenson could be the single greatest moment of my life," he added, emphasizing the last few words forcefully.

"If this is really gonna happen," he continued, "I need to know that we've all got our heads 100% in the game. And that's not gonna happen if you're too busy making goo-goo eyes at El from the other side of the table the entire time!" he finished with a huff. "I'm not playing games here, Michael!"

Mike gasped, feeling affronted. "I was not making goo-goo eyes at her!" he input in his defense, albeit somewhat weakly.

Lucas scoffed, still leaning back with his arms crossed on the opposite side of the table. "Yeah, you kinda were," he muttered with a chuckle, and Mike turned his glare from Dustin to him.

"Oh, and who are *you* to talk, anyway, Mr. Won't-look-Max-in-the-eye," Mike threw back at his friend, whose smirk immediately dropped.

"He does have a point," Dustin concurred.

Lucas scowled at him. "What? I voted yes because I really do think we need their help, but that doesn't mean I have to be buddy-buddies with her, now, does it?" he retorted with a huff, pushing forward on his seat and stretching out a hand to dig into his leftover french fries.

Mike rolled his eyes with a groan. "For Pete's sake. So you made out with her once and then she gave you the runaround afterward. Get over it already."

"Oh, like you got over your crush on El Hopper?" Lucas threw back, biting angrily into his food.

Mike hadn't even started eating yet, and if they did not get off this topic soon, lunch was going to end before he got the chance. "Whatever. I am 100% in this," he tried to reassure Dustin, who just stared at him with an unimpressed expression. "Really, I am. El and Max are going to help us, and we are going to win this. We are meeting Brock Sorenson, no matter what it takes."

"We'd better," Dustin mumbled, reaching out to steal one of Lucas's fries. Lucas slapped his hand away just as Mike started unwrapping his chicken burger.

Lifting it up to his mouth, he sighed. "I never should've told you about El," he mumbled right before taking a bite. He was beginning to reconsider this whole *Friends-don't-lie* thing if it gave free rein to his three friends to tease him about his crush for the rest of his life.

"I don't know," Will piped in, handing Dustin his own leftover fries—

only four or five left, but Dustin appreciated the gesture either way. "I think we would've figured it out by now." As Mike threw him a halfhearted glare, Will shrugged innocently. "Well, you did greet her twice."

Mike shook his head, never able to get really mad at Will, especially when he was stating the truth. Still, he hoped after that afternoon, they'd all realize how well they could work with El and Max, and would get off his case about this.

After all, having the girl he liked on his team could only be an incentive, right? He'd get to talk to her more often, maybe even impress her a little. If only he could get over his own insecurities, this might be the chance he needed to finally do something about this torch he'd carried in his heart for nearly five years.

The stakes for this contest had just gotten a lot higher than he'd originally thought they would be. And he was all in.

.

.

Notes: In case you hadn't figured out yet that I'm a giant nerd, I give you: this fic. xD It's my attempt at an 80s-teen-movie type thing, and I hope that's coming across. Not many things to note in this chapter, but if you've been following my Quiet Moments series for a while, you might recognize Bobby Hastings.

Sorry I've been AWOL for such a long time; I *have* been writing-working on this, mainly, but because the plot is a bit complicated, I didn't want to start posting it until I had it all written out. I'll be posting one chapter per week on Fridays. Oh, and a bit of a warning: the chapters will get a bit longer as we go on (not terribly; maybe averaging ~8K words or so?). This is actually the shortest one. The action really starts next chapter!

2. Clue 1: Math

Searching For Your Heart, Clue #1: Math. PG-13, romance/fluff/friendship, no-powers AU, Mike/Eleven.

One of the world's biggest action movie superstars is coming to town, and every kid in Hawkins High is determined to win MTV's back-to-school scavenger hunt and get a face-to-face meeting with their idol. Mike and his friends are sure they've got this in the bag— until the contest throws a wrench in their plans and their only shot at winning is partnering up with Mike's longtime crush, El Hopper.

Note: The clues for the Scavenger Hunt are actual clues (well, except for the ones relating to Brock Sorenson because those are obviously just made up). You might get a kick out of them if you're into trivia or that kind of stuff— be sure to let me know in a comment if you solve them before the kids do here!

Note 2: This is a high-school AU where Eleven doesn't have her powers, but it still takes place in the 80s because the internet would make it way too easy, lol. xD

.

.

The doorbell rang at 4:37 and Mike made his way up the basement stairs two steps at a time so he could get to the front door before his mother could beat him to it. "Michael!" Karen exclaimed in a chastising manner when all 160 pounds of her teenage son nearly barreled into her in the foyer.

"Sorry, Mom! It's for me," he apologized quickly, pointing to the door for a second before turning away from his mother so he could open it. He still managed, out of the corner of his eye, to see his mother's surprised expression when she saw two girls Mike's age on her doorstep. "Hey, guys. Come in."

Max and El stepped past him and into the foyer, each of them carrying what looked like dozens and dozens of issues of teen

magazines— *Teen Beat*, *BOP*, *Tiger Beat*, as well as *16* and *Seventeen*. Mike figured that was the "research material" El had alluded to earlier in school, and he had to appreciate how smart that actually was on her part— if for any reason they got stuck on one of the Brock Sorenson trivia questions, these magazines could be their salvation.

"Oh, let me help you with that," he offered quickly, reaching out for the load El was carrying in her arms, which she surrendered gladly. It was heavy. She gave him a grateful smile, and he forgot for a moment that Max was carrying a similar load and she was standing right there. He cringed when he found her looking at him with an eyebrow raised high on her forehead. "Um, did you want me to—"

"I'm good," the redhead responded dryly before he could even pose the question, readjusting the weight of the magazines in her arms as if to let him know that she didn't need any help. "Where are the others?"

"Ah, they're in the basement," Mike explained, tilting his head in the direction of the basement door since his arms were now full. "That's the door over there. You guys can go on ahead, just watch your step on the stairs," he warned them, knowing that a couple of the steps were loose and not wanting the added weight of the magazines to cause one of them to trip or something.

"Thanks," El said, and the two of them started to head further into the house. "Hi, Mrs. Wheeler," she greeted Karen politely as they walked past her on the way to the basement.

"Hello, girls," Karen replied with a charmed smile, keeping her eyes on the two girls as El opened the basement door to allow Max to walk down the stairs first. Then, Karen turned to her son, who had just pushed the front door closed with his foot. "Do you need me to bring down some snacks later? Are you kids working on a school project?"

"Something like that," Mike replied absentmindedly as he stood there, and if his eyes lingered on El a little bit too long before she disappeared into the basement, at least his mother didn't seem to notice. "And snacks would be good. Hey, do we have Eggos? El really likes those," he said, remembering Will having mentioned in some previous conversation that frozen waffles were El's favorite food.

"I can make a quick run to the grocery store if we're out," Karen acquiesced with an amused grin. "Which one's El? Is she the brunette?" At Mike's nod, her grin seemed to widen oh-so-lightly. "She's really pretty," she added in a sing-songy tone, like she had just been made aware of some juicy secret she couldn't wait to share with her book club friends.

Mike narrowed his eyes at her. "I guess," he muttered, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of admitting that she saw right through him. Of course El was pretty— as far as Mike was concerned, she was the prettiest girl in school— but that didn't mean he was going to admit his crush out loud to his *mother*. "Let me know if you need help with the snacks," he declared, then promptly hightailed it out of there before his mother could ask any more impertinent questions.

.

.

.

After a brief argument about the logistics of it all ("Are we allowed to use a calculator?" among other questions, promptly answered with "Well, who's going to know?"), they got to work on the first clue. Mike, Lucas, and El were the best out of the group at math, so they sat down on the table to work on the math part of it, while Max, Will, and Dustin divvied up a stack of magazines to start looking for the place where Brock Sorenson was discovered.

Max couldn't remember the place itself, but she remembered that it was somewhere he'd been with his friends. They'd been goofing around and he started reciting lines from *The Godfather*— which Max knew was his favorite movie— out loud when a talent agent just happened to be walking by. The agent gave him his info and asked him to come in for an audition, and the rest was history. Now, if only she could remember *where* the whole thing went down...

They'd started browsing through magazines half an hour ago, and it seemed they had already reached the limit of their attention span. Max, who was lying belly down on the carpet near the foot of El's chair, had clearly gotten sidetracked by some sports article because

she had not passed a page for the last five minutes or so. Will's eyes kept glazing over, and he only seemed to snap out of his trance every couple of minutes to answer the questions Dustin was reading off a "So, how confident are you, actually?" quiz that Will was never going to ace.

"Question number three," Dustin read. "You're chatting to someone at a party and you fancy them a lot. What's your next move?" He rearranged his position before he read the possible choices, stretching his feet out on the couch since Will had perched himself in a corner and left him a lot of space. "A: Keep chatting to try to gauge whether they like you too, then maybe ask for their number at the end of the night if things have gone well. B: Go into full flirting mode, hope they respond well, and then ask them on a date— what's the worst that could happen? C: Keep chatting, but then see if you can get their number off a mutual friend the next day— it's much less awkward that way. D: Ask them out! You feel pretty sure they like you back— why wouldn't they? E: Nothing, just like you always do in these situations."

Will's brows drew together pensively as he mulled over his answer. "I don't know, I feel like I could be a C. I couldn't ask for their number up front, but if I could get it from someone else, maybe... I could do that?" he finished, unsure.

Dustin stared at him with a flat expression, eyebrows raised as if he didn't believe a word he said. "Yeah, I'm going to mark you down as an E," he decided, circling the answer with a pencil.

El tuned out the sound of Will's protests and looked down at the equations she had written down on her notebook.

$$(46 + 4c) / 62 = 4 - [924 / (69c + 2)]$$

$$[1095 - (92a + 89)] - 2 = (37 + 12a) / 73$$

$$3b + 4e = 27$$

$$2b + e = 8$$

$$53d^2 - 106d + 53 = 0$$

She sighed as she underlined her answer for the second equation, lamenting that it was taking her so long to get through the whole problem set. She'd blame her teammates for distracting her with their goofiness, but in reality the most distracting thing in the room was Mike sitting next to her.

Every time he moved his arm, his elbow would graze her forearm and she'd be pulled out of focus all over again. Plus, they were sharing a calculator, so sometimes when she reached out for it absentmindedly, their hands would touch, and she would pull away blushing. And even when they managed to remain away from each other's space, she couldn't help but catch glimpses of him out of the corner of her eye; he mumbled to himself as he worked and sometimes, if he wasn't sure of his next step, he'd bite his lower lip in concentration, and El simply could not tear her eyes away from him when he did.

Well, if she couldn't keep herself from looking over at him, then she might as well use it to her advantage. "What did you get for the second one?" she asked him, leaning in slightly to see if she could see the answer in his notebook.

"Oh, um, c equals four," Mike replied. He must've noticed her frown, because then he asked, "Did you get something different?" He leaned closer so he could sneak a peek at her notebook as she had his, and she had to try hard not to let show how much the small movement flustered her.

She pushed her notebook closer to him so he could take a look at her work. He skimmed through it quickly— it took him a couple of tries to spot something off, but eventually recognition dawned in his expression. "Oh, I know what it is. You missed a negative sign here, see?" He pointed to it with the tip of his pencil.

El followed the gesture and groaned when she realized he was right. "Of course. I should've noticed that earlier," she said, pulling her notebook back so she could erase the last few steps of her work and correct it. She smiled gratefully at him. "Thanks. And I'm sorry it's taking me so long to work this out, by the way. I'm usually better than that."

"No worries," Mike replied with a dismissive shake of his head.

"Everybody works at their own pace. Besides, you're about to start with the two-variable system, right?" He looked down at his own notebook with a grimace. "You'll probably still finish it before I do. I always do it by substitution and it takes too freaking long," he added before going back to his work. El had to smile at his attempts to make her feel better about going slow. It was sweet.

Dustin spoke up again from the couch. "I see someone has already marked B to this question," he quipped with a toothy smirk. "Max, was that you? Are you going up to boys at parties and asking them out?"

"Yeah, why not?" Max retorted, never taking her eyes off the magazine she was browsing through. She had already moved past the sports article she'd been reading before, but was still taking her time reading through every text box in the rest of the issue. "If you know you like someone, why waste time with dumb social conventions that don't make any difference in the long run anyway?"

"Yeah, who has time for dumb social conventions like, say, actually having the decency to talk to a person after you've made out with them," Lucas intervened under his breath, though he said it loudly enough for everyone to hear it. He wasn't looking at anyone in particular, remaining mostly focused on the work he was doing with the equations, but everyone knew who he was talking about.

Dustin sighed, shaking his head. "Yeah, I regret asking that question."

Max twisted her torso around so she could glare at Lucas. "Do you have something you want to say to me?" she demanded, narrowing her eyes at him. "Because you can just say it straight to my face, then."

Even Mike and El had now paused in their work to warily witness the confrontation that was surely about to take place. Lucas said nothing, but he glared right back at Max. The tension in the room was palpable— which is why everyone breathed a sigh of relief when Will suddenly exclaimed "Guys! I found it!" and stood up from the couch to make his way to the middle of the room.

He set the magazine down on the carpet so that everybody could

crowd around him and read it. In the end, it was Max who leaned over his shoulder and read aloud the caption on a picture of Brock Sorenson at some red carpet event. "Luck of the mobster! Brock Sorenson was discovered by a talent agent while hanging out at a diner with a group of his friends, reciting lines from *The Godfather* just for kicks." She looked up, moving from face to face with wide eyes. "That's it! He was discovered at a diner."

"So now we just need to find *something* in a diner," Dustin said, not sounding terribly impressed. "I'm so glad we're ahead of the curve, guys."

"Take it easy, we'll be done soon," Lucas let him know, as he, Mike, and El pushed themselves to their feet and went back to the table to finish working on those equations. With the situation between him and Max diffused (at least for the moment), and Dustin having given up on the confidence quiz (Will got "About average confidence"), they were able to focus on the math and actually started working faster.

It was near dinner time when they finally got all the equations done and were as confident as they could possibly be that their answers were correct. "So?" Will asked as he, Dustin and Max approached the other three at the table. "What do we have?"

"Four," Lucas started, looking down at the list in his notebook, "three, one, six, and one." He finished the sentence with a resigned sigh, looking up to meet his teammates' blank gazes.

"What does that mean?" Dustin asked, clueless as to the significance of the five digits. "Forty-three thousand one hundred and sixty-one? How are we supposed to get a thing from that?"

"It's too short to be a phone number," Will pointed out.

"Too long to be a year," Max added, nodding. "Maybe a date?"

"April 31st, 1961 doesn't work," Lucas shook his head, immediately nixing that idea. "Neither does January 43rd. Maybe they're some kinda coordinates?" he suggested instead, tilting his head as he looked down at the numbers again. "I could take a look at a map, but why would they give us coordinates to a place when the second clue

already is a place?"

"It's gotta be code for something," El suggested, although she herself could not even hazard a guess at what that something could be.

"Actually, I was thinking about something earlier when I was working on the equations," Mike said suddenly, pulling Lucas's notebook with the list toward himself. El and Will, who were the nearest to him, moved closer so they could look over his shoulders. "I thought it was weird that they used different letters for the variables than the usual x , y , and z they use in our algebra textbook."

"They're just variables," Dustin reminded him, clearly not seeing Mike's point. El couldn't blame him; she was kind of lost herself. "Any letter can work as a variable. It doesn't always have to be x , y , or z ."

"I know, but these particular letters— a , b , c , d , and e — are usually reserved for constants," Mike insisted with a shake of his head. He grabbed Lucas's pencil from his hand. "I think the fact that they chose to use these five exact letters— the first five letters of the alphabet— means something. Like..." He leaned down so he could start writing a new list on a blank page. "...what if we put them in alphabetical order?"

"Three, one, four, one, and six," Will read the numbers as Mike wrote them down. He was silent for a heartbeat, and then he gasped. "3.1416! That's pi!"

"So we have to find pi in a diner?" Dustin asked, still not getting it. But then he seemed to really hear what he had just said, and realization dawned, finally. "Oh! We have to find *pie* in a diner!" El, too, started getting excited, now that she understood what Mike had been getting at.

"So, that's it, then?" Max input, clearly not as entertained by the mathematical pun as the boys and El were. "We just go to the nearest diner, order a slice of pie, take a photo, and then submit it to Ms. Tanaka tomorrow?"

"No, it has to be a specific diner," Lucas said, unfortunately dumping a metaphorical bucket of ice cold water on everyone's excitement.

"And there's like four different places it could be. How are we supposed to know? We already solved both clues and they only get us so far."

"Benny's Burgers," El blurted out as soon as the idea popped into her head. She was a little embarrassed that she'd just yelled it out like that, but the more she thought about it, the more it made sense to her. "It's Benny's. It has to be."

"How do you know?" Mike asked as everyone turned to look at her, curious.

"Benny has a framed poster of *Hazard Pay 2* hanging up on the dining area," she explained, remembering the frame so clearly in her mind. She knew Benny was really into action movies.

"Are you sure?" Dustin asked, not entirely sold. El knew what he was thinking: they'd probably been to Benny's before, and they probably couldn't tell you a thing about the decor, other than 'typical diner fare.' El didn't blame them; most people would think the same way.

"My dad and Benny are good friends. I've been to the diner probably hundreds of times. I know that place like the back of my hand," she insisted, trying to transmit to them how confident she was about this. "Trust me, guys. It's definitely Benny's."

The others didn't look fully convinced, but it was Mike who finally intervened in her favor. "I say we go," he said, sending a supportive nod El's way. "Worst that can happen is we get it wrong and have to try a different diner. It might set us back a little but at least we tried *something*, right?"

The others couldn't find much fault with that logic, so without as much as a "We're going out for dinner!" to Mike's mom, they all piled into Mike's station wagon (Dustin called shotgun, and it was just lucky that the other four were fairly skinny although Max still ended up squished rather dramatically between El and the window) and made it all the way out to Benny's Burgers in record time.

Barely waiting for Mike to actually park the car, they stampeded into the dining establishment, ignoring the booths— which were pretty

packed as they'd gotten there just in time for the dinner rush— and heading straight to the window that separated the dining area from the kitchens.

"Benny!" El called out to the large, imposing man who was unassumingly flipping some burgers up at the flat top.

"Hiya, Ellie!" the man smiled congenially at her and her friends, greeting them with a nod of his head as his hands were otherwise occupied. "What can I do ya for? You here to pick up some grub for you and your old man?"

Dustin cut in before she could answer in the negative. "We're doing the Brock Sorenson scavenger hunt and the first clue brought us here," he explained quickly, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "So, are we in the right place?"

"*Please* say it's here," El begged, entwining her fingers in front of her face as if praying.

Benny narrowed his eyes at them for a moment that felt like an eternity as they waited on bated breath, and for a second El was deathly afraid he was going to tell them they'd gotten the whole thing wrong. But then he grinned. "Yeah, it's here."

The six of them erupted into cheers, high-fiving each other repeatedly as the older man laughed at their exuberance. "Are we the first ones here?" Lucas asked, the only one of them always keeping at the forefront of his mind that this was a competition and they could still lose even if they got everything right.

"Yeah, you're the first ones," Benny confirmed, prompting another round of cheers and squeals. Once the noise subsided, the man gave the teenagers a knowing smile. "Well, then," he started. "What can I get ya, kids?" he prompted.

They were almost too excited to say, each trying to prompt another to be the one to make the order. In the end, though, Mike was the one who spoke, unable to stop a bright grin from taking over his face as he did so. "We'd like six burger platters," he stated confidently, "and a slice of your best pie."

.

.

.

They got a waitress to take a photo of the group with Benny and the plate that held their pie slice. They were all grinning like crazy, Dustin giving Max bunny ears while Lucas and Mike pointed excitedly at the pie, Benny hugging El and Will to his sides. Even Mike, who usually wasn't one for pictures, liked it so much that they decided they'd make copies of it, so each of them could keep it as a memento.

Still feeling euphoric at their first victory, they made their way to a miraculously empty corner booth where they ate their dinner, Dustin and Lucas fought over the slice of cherry pie, and Max and El shared a caramel waffle a la mode that Benny had brought them on the house. Will snuck bites from both desserts and Mike would've liked some sweets, too, but he was much more preoccupied watching El indulge— he thought it was absolutely adorable how excited she got over waffles.

He felt so... full at the moment. Not just because they had gotten their first clue right and they were one step closer to actually winning a face-to-face meeting with Brock Sorenson, but also because... this. Just sitting there, all six of them together, joking around, talking about their favorite movie moments and sharing anecdotes from their first week of school like they'd all been friends since kindergarten.

Even Max and El, who didn't routinely hang out with them at school, felt like they *fit* with the group effortlessly. Even though he knew this was an alliance of convenience and the two groups would eventually part ways once the contest was over, in his heart, Mike wished it could always be like this. It just felt so... right.

Once they were done with their dinner they said bye to Benny and drove back to Mike's house to pick up all their stuff that they had left in his basement in their haste to make it to the diner earlier. Will put the photo inside a folder, cradling it like it was the Holy Grail. When all their things were packed and they started heading back outside,

Mike caught sight of Max standing by the door, anxiously tugging at the strap of her backpack as she apparently waited for someone.

The mystery was solved when she took hold of Lucas's elbow as he walked by. "Hey, can we..." she started, a little hesitant in a way that Mike didn't usually associate with someone like Max. "Can we talk?"

Lucas was quiet for a moment, not looking like he was too sure this was a good idea. But eventually he relented, telling Max they could go to his backyard where they could talk without people (that is, Erica) butting in. "Can you get home on your own?" Max asked El, remembering that she was her ride back home.

"Um, sure, I guess—" El started in an understanding fashion because that's just the kind of person she was, but Mike stepped in before she could finish the sentence.

"Oh, I can give you a ride," he offered, stepping into the conversation carefully, not wanting to seem too eager, either. Everybody knew that Chief Hopper lived in the outskirts of town. There was no way El could make it back there on foot, not to mention it was probably dangerous, plus it seemed like a waste to have the chief— probably in a bad mood and tired from a full day of work enforcing law in their thankless little town— come all the way from his house and then back just to pick her up.

She turned to look at him, half hopeful and half hesitant, and he hastened to add, "I mean, I have to drop Dustin and Will off anyway," not wanting her to feel like she was being an inconvenience. Not that he wouldn't give her a ride even if she was the only one out of the group who needed one— hey, any extra time he got to spend with her was welcome.

She seemed relieved when she heard that, and she thanked him effusively and repeatedly before the group split, Max and Lucas heading over to Lucas's house while the other four got back into Mike's car without much fanfare.

The first leg of the trip was dominated by Dustin obsessively wondering what Max and Lucas were talking about over at his house and then attempting to draw the others into a bet on whether Max

and Lucas would eventually get together or not. Considering they'd been sniping at each other just a few hours ago, none of them wanted to take a gander at that bet— who knew what could come out of this truce. But hearing Dustin throw out ideas of how their conversation might be going, each one more surreal than the previous one, made for a ride filled with hysterical laughter.

Things were quieter when Dustin was dropped off at his place, with Will and El discussing their favorite music and whether or not their parents had talked to each other recently— El seemed convinced her dad had a "thing" for Will's mom, and Will didn't seem to mind one bit. Mike mostly just listened as he drove, wondering if this is what their interaction outside of school usually was. He knew the two of them were friendly, but he'd never witnessed their rapport firsthand, and he found it quite illuminating. Then Will was dropped off (with specific instructions to "guard that photo with your life!") and it was just Mike and El.

El's place was much closer to Will's than Will's was to Dustin's, so the last leg of the trip was quicker. "Hey, um," was Mike's first attempt at conversation, "I just wanted to say that... I thought you were really cool today, with the whole Benny's thing and all," he admitted, sneaking a glance at her out of the corner of his eye. It was dark on the road they were in, but he thought he saw her cheeks flush. "Really. We wouldn't have figured it out so quickly if you hadn't been there."

"Ah, just got lucky, I guess," she waved off his compliment, but she was smiling, so he figured she was somewhat flattered, at least. "But we never would've known what to order there if you hadn't figured out those equations. I mean, I can do the math, but it never would've occurred to me to reorder the numbers. Mike, that was brilliant."

Now it was his turn to feel flustered, not having expected her to turn his compliment right back at him. "Someone would've figured it out eventually," he replied modestly, but he couldn't stop the grin that was threatening to break on his face. She thought he was smart! How amazing was that?

"But thanks to you, we got there first," she insisted after telling him to take a right turn in the next intersection. They were quiet for a bit,

the only sounds inside the car coming from the radio, which was—rather fittingly, Mike thought— playing *Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now*. "Hey, Mike," El began carefully after about a minute of silence, "do you think we can really win this?" she asked, hopeful, but still retaining some caution.

"I think we've got a fair shot at it," he replied with a good degree of confidence. After things had gone so great for them today he was riding a high, but he really did believe they could do this. They had a good balance of strengths and weaknesses, and save for that whole Max and Lucas thing (which Mike sincerely hoped got resolved that very night one way or the other), they had a good partnership going. He didn't know anyone else who was participating in the contest, but that had to count for something, at least.

"It's gonna be amazing if we do," she declared, leaning back on her seat with a deep sigh. "Can you even imagine it?"

"Yeah, it's going to be so awesome," Mike had to agree. Glancing her way to find her with her eyes closed and a big smile on her face, he had to add, "I didn't have you pegged for a Brock Sorenson fan, I admit. It doesn't seem like the type of movies someone like you would watch."

"What, because I wear a lot of pink I can't like action movies?" she threw back, and Mike sputtered, almost apologizing out of reflex—the last thing he wanted was to offend her or label her in any way—but before he could actually string words together, she continued speaking. "You're right, though. They're not the type of movies I usually watch, but Max *looooooves* him. She made me watch most of his movies with her and, well, I just couldn't help but really like them. He's *such* a good actor."

"He's the best," Mike agreed, nodding as he made one more right turn. "We're going to win this contest. You'll see," he promised her, and mentally patted himself in the back when he saw her smile, pleased.

They arrived at El's place before they had time for much more conversation. "So, this is me," El signaled toward her house with a smile as Mike parked the car curbside. "Thanks again for doing this. I

can already imagine how grumpy my dad would've been if I had dragged him all the way back to town just to pick me up."

"Yeah, no problem," Mike said with a shrug. He looked at the house and the flickering light coming out through the window— the chief was probably watching television— before looking at her again. "Does your dad know that you're doing this Brock Sorenson thing?"

"Yeah, kinda," was El's not-entirely-convincing response, punctuated by a vacillating wave of her head. "I told him over the weekend when I first heard about the contest, but it went in one ear and out the other, so today I just told him I'd be working on a school thing," she elaborated with a chuckle. She shook her head as she thought of something else. "He still doesn't know who Brock Sorenson is," she added with a roll of her eyes, but she was still laughing, so it came off as affectionate.

"Well, to be fair, I doubt my parents have any idea who he is, either," Mike pointed out, sure that his mother would barely recognize Brock's name as "that guy from the movies" and his father would probably think it was a type of bread or something.

"Yes, but he's *watched* a bunch of Brock's movies with us. He should know by now!" El grumbled, crossing her arms with an exasperated little huff that Mike thought was absolutely endearing. She shook her head. "He can be a bit clueless, but I love him anyway."

"You and your dad are really close, huh?" Mike asked, feeling both enthralled by the way she seemed to glow when talking about her family, and a little dejected because he knew he would never have that with his own father. "That's really cool. My dad couldn't care less about anything that I like," he blurted out before he realized what he was doing.

No! Don't bring up your dad, you wastoid! He really wanted to kick himself for bringing the mood down when he saw her expression fall. "I'm so sorry to hear that, Mike," she whispered, sounding genuinely sad for him.

The last thing in the world he wanted was for her to pity him, so he hurried to try and make it sound a little less pitiful. "It's okay,

though!" he exclaimed, maybe a little too eagerly. "I'm used to it. And I've got the guys, anyway. They more than make up for my dad's lack of interest," he pointed out, not entirely sure that was better in any way.

To her credit, she tried to bounce the conversation back up when he couldn't. "And hey, you've also got Max and me," she suggested earnestly, giving him the most beautiful, supportive smile. "We're your friends, too."

Just looking at her when she smiled at him like that, he felt like he had thousands of butterflies fluttering around in his stomach and they tickled so much from the inside that he couldn't help but chuckle, the gleefulness nearly pouring out of him. "Really?" he gasped, his brain almost unable to process that this amazing girl—popular, interesting, mesmerizing El Hopper—actually wanted to be friends with him. "You'd really want to hang out with a bunch of nerds?"

She looked down at her lap for a second and, this time under the glow of the light coming from the window, he could clearly see a blush rise to her cheeks. She looked up at him and, still smiling, declared, "I would love to hang out with you, Mike Wheeler."

He could do nothing but stare at her with an idiotic grin on his face, his heart beating so loud he swore she'd be able to hear it from the passenger seat. Before he could actually put together some kind of a response, however, she quipped, "I'll see you at school," and opened the door, her ponytail swinging behind her as she got out of the car.

"Yeah... see you..." Mike sat there feeling like his head was exploding as she made her way to her front door. His mind was working a mile a minute. What did she mean when she said she would love to hang out with him? Did she mean just him, or hang out with all of their friends? Was she asking him out? Should *he* ask her out? Was she flirting? Was *that* what flirting was? He was so out of his depth, for God's sake.

Man, she wasn't even out of view yet and he already wanted it to be tomorrow, so he could see her again.

With a groan he dropped his head against the steering wheel, pushing himself right back upright with a jump when he realized his forehead had hit smack in the middle and the klaxon had gone off. El, who had just opened the front door and was about to take a step inside, turned at the sound and waved at him before walking into the house. He awkwardly waved back before setting the car on drive and pulling away from the curb in the direction of Maple street.

.
.
.

"So, how did it go with you and Lucas?" El asked later that night when Max called her to talk about everything that happened that day. "Did you guys talk it out, or what?" She had pulled the living room phone inside her room to talk to her best friend as she usually did, thinking she really needed to convince her dad to let her have a phone in her room or just leave this one in her room permanently. It's not like he would miss this one or anything— he had passed out on the couch while *MacGyver* played on the TV, and this was hardly an unusual occurrence.

(Joyce and Flo were the only ones who ever called *him*, anyway).

"Yeah, I think we're good now," Max replied with a sigh from the other end of the line, and in the background El heard some squeaking that indicated her friend had just laid down on her bed. "He was really mad that I completely ignored him after Jennifer's party, which, admittedly, was a shitty thing to do on my part."

"Admittedly," El agreed with a nod. She had tried to ask Max before why she was so keen on avoiding Lucas after that night— or why she had made out with him in the first place, really— but Max was always quick to change the topic whenever his name came up, so El figured she just wasn't ready to talk about it.

"So I tried to explain it to him from my side," Max continued speaking as El rearranged her position so she was sitting Indian style on her own bed. "I told him I *do* like him, but I'm just... not looking for a

relationship or anything like that right now," she admitted, and El was surprised to hear her admit to liking Lucas so easily. It felt like something of a milestone, and she wasn't about to interrupt. "I told him about my family—the whole mess with my parents' divorce and my mother's remarriage and all."

"And what did he say?" El asked, curious. She knew how much those issues had marked Max, how close to the vest she held her feelings about her family, and she hoped Lucas had been sensitive about it rather than throwing her honesty back in her face as other boys would.

"He said he understands," Max said in a tone that made El almost *hear* the shrug of her shoulders through the earpiece. "He says he really likes me, but he's okay with not pushing things any further right now. So we're going to keep getting to know each other as friends," she finished in a vague tone, like it wasn't a big deal, but El was proud of how grown-up Max and Lucas were being, either way.

"Besides, I have to keep my options open, you know?" Max continued speaking, unaware of El's thoughts. "I mean, what if we win this thing and get to meet Brock Sorenson? I have to be available in case he happens to fall madly in love with me."

El burst into laughter. "You're sixteen and he's in his thirties! Eww!" she decried in between guffaws. Her best friend could be really something.

"Sixteen but not blind!" Max retorted with a scoff, but she was laughing, too, so El knew not to take her seriously. "All joking aside, though, things are good with Lucas now. We know where we both stand. And if something happens between us in the future, well... we'll deal with it when it happens, I guess," she added. She was still trying to keep it vague, not wanting to write anything in stone, but El knew this was a pretty big thing coming from Max. She couldn't help but be excited for her friend.

"So you're not going to get jealous if he asks some other girl to Homecoming?" El asked. She had to tease her, just a little. Max was always teasing her about something or another— El didn't mind, but she had to get in a tease or two of her own when she was given the

chance.

"Oh, no, I'm going to be freaking pissed," Max retorted straight away in a dry tone. But then she burst into amused giggles. "Whatever. We'll figure it out."

El had to chuckle. "I'm glad you guys made up. I think it's very mature of you."

"Hey! Watch it with that tone of surprise, you jerk!" her friend exclaimed on the other end of the line, and that led the two right back into raucous laughter that took nearly a full minute to subside. "What about you, then? Judging from today, it seems like you and Wheeler make a pretty good team."

"Yeah, we do," El agreed with a fluttery sigh. Closing her eyes, she let herself fall back on her bed with her head on her pillow and thought back to everything that had happened that day. Working with the boys. Getting to spend the afternoon with Will. Laughing at Dustin's jokes. Having dinner and waffles at Benny's. Getting a ride home with Mike.

"I think this scavenger hunt thing is going to be fun," she said, smiling to herself as she looked up at her bedroom ceiling.

"I think so, too," she heard Max reply, although she sounded a little muffled. "Alright, I gotta go. See you tomorrow!" the redhead added, to which El replied in kind. Once the call was over, she stretched out her hand to put the phone back into its base, taking a second to grab her old teddy bear from her bedside table.

She hugged her plush toy to her chest and breathed in the scent of the laundry detergent they used to wash all their clothes, wishing it was someone else she was hugging instead. "Good night, Mike," she whispered into the plushie's soft fur, as if by some magic it could transmit her words to him through the distance.

She hoped with every beat of her heart that Mike was thinking about her just as she was thinking about him, but she knew that was probably just wishful thinking. So she closed her eyes and let sleep overtake her, comforted by the fact that she would see him again

tomorrow. She had that much to look forward to.

.

.

Notes: *Teen Beat*, *BOP*, *Tiger Beat*, *16* and *Seventeen* were teen magazines in the 80s and 90s, kind of in the vein of what *Teen Vogue* is today. Now, I've been past the target demographic of these magazines for well over a decade, and I know most of these have gone the way of the dodo because of the internet, but I *believe* that *Tiger Beat* and *Seventeen* are still around.

I didn't come up with the question Dustin reads off the magazine quiz; I got that off of BuzzFeed, so all credit to them. *Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now* is a song by the band Starship; it came in at no. 5 in the list of Billboard's hot 100 songs of 1987. The bit where Mike bangs his head against the steering wheel and the klaxon goes off, I got that from *Love, Simon*, which is a movie that I loooooove. *MacGyver* is an action/adventure TV series starring Richard Dean Anderson that aired 1985-1992 (a reboot starring Lucas Till is currently airing on CBS).

Up next week: History!

3. Clue 2: History

Searching For Your Heart, Clue #2: History. PG-13, romance/fluff/friendship, no-powers AU, Mike/Eleven.

One of the world's biggest action movie superstars is coming to town, and every kid in Hawkins High is determined to win MTV's back-to-school scavenger hunt and get a face-to-face meeting with their idol. Mike and his friends are sure they've got this in the bag— until the contest throws a wrench in their plans and their only shot at winning is partnering up with Mike's longtime crush, El Hopper.

Note: The clues for the Scavenger Hunt are actual clues (well, except for the ones relating to Brock Sorenson because those are obviously just made up). You might get a kick out of them if you're into trivia or that kind of stuff— be sure to let me know in a comment if you solve them before the kids do here!

Note 2: This is a high-school AU where Eleven doesn't have her powers, but it still takes place in the 80s because the internet would make it way too easy, lol. xD

.

.

"El! Hey, El! Wait a minute!"

El paused for a moment on her way out the back door of the school and looked over her shoulder, catching sight of Dustin running in her direction and urgently waving at her to get her attention. "Hi, Dustin," she said congenially. "What's up?"

Dustin was panting by the time he made it to her side. "I... wanted to... give you..." He seemed to give up on the full sentence halfway through, just extending his hand so he could hand her over a piece of paper he was holding. "Here."

El took it and looked it over, noticing it was a copy of the group photo from the diner. "Oh! Thank you!" she exclaimed, smiling at

how happy and goofy they all looked in it. "I'm going to put it up on the corkboard I have in my room," she added, already imagining where she would pin it up. Remembering that the original photo was supposed to be submitted to their Guidance Counselor in order for it to count toward the contest, she asked, "Did you take the photo to Ms. Tanaka? Do you have the second clue?"

"Yeah, we have it," he said, after taking a good, long, deep breath. "We're going to be working on it at the library tomorrow morning," he let her know.

"Oh, okay," El agreed with a nod. "I'll let Max know, then."

She turned to keep walking but halted in her tracks when Dustin spoke up again. "Actually... about that..." El turned to look at him again, expectant. He seemed to have something he wanted to say, but wasn't sure about saying it. Eventually, though, he sighed, deciding to go for it. "Uh, can we talk for a bit?"

"Well, I was on my way to the track field," she pointed out, signaling in the direction of the door with one hand. "Today's the first meeting of the softball team, and I told Max I'd wait for her at the bleachers. But... you could walk with me if you want?" she offered instead, figuring whatever Dustin had to say would probably not take long. It's not like they had long conversations on a regular basis.

"Yeah, sure." Dustin signaled for her to lead the way, which she did, and he moved to keep up with her steps. "So... this thing where I didn't want us to partner up with you and Max for the Brock Sorenson contest..." he started. "I just wanted to clear the air. I don't want you to think I don't like you or something. That whole thing... it wasn't about you."

"Okay," El assented, actually grateful to hear him say it. She *had* wondered after that day whether Dustin had some kind of problem with her, and although it thankfully hadn't come up in any of their interactions while working on the first clue, it still bothered her a bit. "What was it about, then?"

Once again he seemed reluctant to say, so El hastened to tell him he didn't need to tell her if he didn't want to, but he insisted. "It's okay,

just... if I tell you, will you promise not to tell Max?" he asked, still wary.

This surprised El. She didn't know Max and Dustin were acquainted in any way other than sharing a few classes through the years, so she hadn't expected her opinion on anything to be of particular importance to him. This was interesting. "All right, I won't tell her," she let him know. She usually shared most things in her life with Max (hopeless crush on a certain freckled boy notwithstanding), but she could keep things to herself if they were someone else's secrets.

Dustin nodded and took a deep breath, as if steeling himself for what he was about to say. "It's just that... I kinda used to have a crush on Max," he admitted, lowering his gaze so that the lid of his cap hid the upper half of his face.

To say El was *not* expecting that reveal would be an understatement. "Oh my God. Really?" she said, unable to contain a bright grin from forming on her lips.

"Yeah..." Dustin admitted reluctantly, tilting his head to one side, then the other. He looked up and something in El's expression must've told her she wasn't going to judge him, because he chuckled. "When she first moved here, she beat my *Dig Dug* high score at the arcade. Like, by a lot," he added, smiling as he remembered. "And I just thought that was the coolest thing, you know? I thought she was amazing."

El almost cooed. He'd had a crush on her friend since middle school? How adorable was that! "And then last year there was that party at Jennifer Hayes' place," Dustin continued, not really looking at El as he spoke but with his gaze locked on the bleachers at the track field, which they were nearing. "And I told myself that was going to be the night, that was the moment I was going to ask her to dance, show her some moves, you know," he quipped, emphasizing the word "moves" in a way that made El laugh. "And then I found her in the basement... with Lucas."

All the mirth left El at the sight of his dejected expression. "Oh no," she lamented. "I'm so sorry, Dustin."

"Nah, it's fine," he said with a nonchalant shrug. "I mean, it really *sucked* at the moment because I really liked her, but... Lucas has been my best friend since the fourth grade. If they had something going on, I wasn't going to get in the way," he asserted with a shake of his head.

"And I got over it, anyway. Mostly," he declared, although that "mostly" tacked on at the end made El wonder just how "over it" he really was. "I was just worried that things would get awkward, or that I wouldn't know how to act around her, you know? Back in middle school I would try to talk to her, and I kind of kept making an idiot out of myself."

They walked 'round to the front of the bleachers and sat down on the bottom row, sitting sideways so they could only see Coach Bailey and the girls of the softball team if they turned their heads. El quickly located Max by the bright color of her hair.

"I know it's hard to believe, what with all of this," Dustin continued speaking, signaling to all of himself with his hands in a way that was so purposely self-deprecating that it made El snort, "but I'm not that great at talking to girls. And Max, well, she can be pretty intimidating," he added, and El could definitely see his point. God knew she loved Max with every fiber of her being, but she could be a handful.

Still, that didn't mean Dustin should pin his insecurities on her entire gender. "Girls are not some mysterious, exotic creature, Dustin," she told him with a roll of her eyes. "All you have to do is be yourself."

"You think so?" he replied, not looking convinced. "Because that hasn't really worked in the past."

"I do think so," she insisted, lifting a hand to his shoulder comfortingly. "You're a great guy, Dustin. You're super smart, you're really funny, and you've got the best smile," she listed encouragingly. Granted, she liked Mike's smile better, but she'd come to find in the last couple of days that Dustin's grins were contagious, and she thought that was a great quality for a person to have. "I'm sure someday some girl will notice all of that and snatch you up straight away."

"Aww. Thanks, El," he said, giving her a smile as if to underline her point. "You know, you're really nice. No wonder Mike likes you so much!" He stood up and rearranged the strap of his bag on his shoulder. "Anyway, I gotta go. See you tomorrow!" he said, and started walking around the bleachers.

"See you tomorrow," El retorted in kind almost automatically. It wasn't until he had turned the corner and was out of sight that her brain actually processed what he'd said about Mike. "Wait, what?" She sprung to her feet in a second, hurriedly making her way to the end of the bleachers.

"Dustin? What did you just say?" she yelled in the direction of his retreating back. But it was too late; he had already broken into a run, eager to get back to the front of the school where his bike was parked. If she wanted confirmation that she hadn't just imagined him saying that Mike liked her, it would have to wait until later.

.
. .

Because they had solved the first clue so quickly, they'd been hoping it would be the same with all the other clues.

They were wrong.

They'd been working on the second clue for nearly a week now, and they still weren't any closer to an answer than they had been the first day. The subject for the second clue was history, which meant practically camping out at the library every day after school, and quite frankly, they were all getting a little sick of the place.

"I think that's it, guys. This is as close as we're gonna get," Will lamented with a resigned sigh as he closed yet another book on world history with a (too) loud *plop*. "As far as we've been able to find, the first battle Napoleon fought after the truce with the Prussians in 1807 was the battle of Sables d'Olonne. That has to be it."

Mike looked down at the question he had written down (and

highlighted over and over) on his notebook: *What is the group that first attacked Napoleon after his 1807 signing of the Treaties of Tilsit?* If the answer was Sables d'Olonne as Will had suggested now for the third time, that meant that the group in question was the British. And that meant they would have to find something British somewhere in Hawkins. It might be easier to find a needle in a haystack.

"Yeah, but how does that even help us?" Lucas huffed, scratching the back of his head with one hand in frustration. He had his own gigantic history tome in front of him, and no better answer than the one Will had just put forth. "And what does Sables-de-whatsit even mean, anyway?"

"Oh, I looked that up," El chimed in enthusiastically, shifting the book she had in front of her with the notebook she'd been taking notes in. She passed a few pages before she landed on the piece of info she was looking for. "Here it is: Sables d'Olonne means 'Sands of Olonne.' It's the name of a beach town in France."

"So... maybe we need to go to a beach, then," Max suggested, waving her pencil back and forth as she spoke.

"That'll be a little difficult considering Hawkins is landlocked," Lucas retorted, shaking his head.

"There is some sand at Sattler's quarry..." Will input from the opposite side of the table, grasping at every straw they could get their hands on because that was the only choice they had at this point.

"It's not gonna be Sattler's quarry," Mike said, leaning back on his chair dejectedly as he dropped his own pencil on top of his notebook. "Unless they want us to take a picture of a pile of dirt, the answer to the clue is not the beach. Again, it can't be a place. It has to be a thing," he reminded them. He didn't mean to be short with them, but they kept making the same mistake— thinking the answer to the first half of the clue was a place when there was a whole second half of the clue that was supposed to tell them where to go— and all that meant was that they wasted time every time.

Thankfully, before anyone could throw his tone right back at him (they'd been at this for hours, and they were all starting to get...

testy, to say the least), Dustin came back from his heated dialogue with the librarian with a large pile of books in his hands.

"We've got a problem, guys," he said dramatically as he dropped the books on the table. "We need to take out all these books, right?" he said, signaling to the pile of books he'd just brought over as well as a smaller pile at the center of the table they hadn't yet got to. "But dear miss Marissa there," he continued, waving at the woman at the librarian's desk with a contemptuous smile, "won't let me take out more than five books at a time." The older woman was still glaring at him when he turned around to face the table.

"So just take out five and we'll split the rest between the rest of us," Max responded with a groan, like she thought Dustin was making a mountain out of a molehill (which, of course, he was). She stretched out her hand so she could grab one of the books Dustin had just dropped in front of them and passed it around the table.

"Thank you, Maxine. That's an actually helpful solution," Dustin replied with a grateful grin, never mind that his words implied that the rest of them weren't being helpful in the slightest.

"Call me Maxine again and I'll show you where you can shove your library card, Henderson," Max retorted without bothering to look up from what she was doing.

"Yes, ma'am," Dustin shot back immediately. "Max. Ma'am." He shook his head. "It was supposed to be a compliment..." he muttered under his breath, but Mike was close enough that he could hear it clearly.

"Okay, so we all get books to read over the weekend," Lucas summarized once Max handed him a couple of books from the pile. "Since Mike just brought it up, what do we do with the location part of the clue? We've spent so much time with this Napoleon thing that we haven't even looked at *that* yet." He looked down at his own notebook, searching for the flyer with the new clue between the pages. "What was it, again?"

"I got it," El once again came through, having her own copy of the flyer at hand. "It's: 'What was Brock Sorenson standing in front of when he got drawn into the assassination plot at the center of *Wizard*

for Hire?" she read.

They all were silent for a moment as they thought about it, but soon ideas started flying back and forth. They had all watched *Wizard for Hire*, of course— multiple times, even— but it seemed that while they knew the exact point of the movie the question referred to, they couldn't really be certain of what was in the background during that scene.

Dustin was sure it was some kind of abandoned warehouse, Will insisted it was a burning building, and Max swore it was a dry cleaner's, because somehow that made more sense to her. "It's definitely somewhere in the city," Lucas asserted when his suggestion of a hardware store was promptly shot down.

"That tells us nothing," Mike declared, shaking his head. "The whole movie takes place in the city." They all slumped on their seats, disappointed that they were stuck on the second part of the clue as well as the first one. They didn't know of any other teams that were competing or how ahead they were, but they all had a feeling they were falling behind.

Dustin, however, was starting to smile. "Oh no," he said, in an overexaggerated tone that made him sound anything but dismayed. "We're going to have to watch *Wizard for Hire* again. What a travesty." That one managed to make everybody laugh.

After agreeing to meet up on Saturday night at Will's place to watch the movie and hopefully get at least half of this damn question over with, they packed up their stuff, moved over to the librarian's desk to check the books out, and then split up to go to their respective homes.

Mike caught the tail end of El and Max saying their goodbyes, and not for the first time, it struck Mike as odd. He had noticed over the past week of their work in the library that El didn't leave with Max as she usually did everywhere else, but rather she walked out on her own. He wasn't sure what she did after that, though.

"Hey, El," he called out, trotting until he was walking alongside her on the way to the main entrance. "Are you walking home? 'Cause I

can give you a ride if you want," he offered, once again not wanting to just leave her to walk all the way to her place. It was a pretty long trek to make on foot.

"Oh, thanks, but I'm just headed over to the station," she said, signaling with her hand in the direction she was about to start walking. "I usually just sit there and work on some homework while I wait for Dad's shift to be done. I guess today I'm going to be reading about Napoleon," she added with a chuckle, tightening her hold on the two books she'd been assigned in their earlier shuffle.

"It's only a couple of blocks away from here," she let him know, in case he wasn't aware where the only police station in Hawkins was. "It's not that long of a walk."

"Ah, well, uh, can I walk you, then?" Mike insisted. "My car is parked in that direction, anyway." It really wasn't— he had parked on the exact opposite end of Main street, in front of the Radio Shack— but he wasn't about to pass up an opportunity to get a few minutes alone with the girl he liked.

She gave him a (heartstopping) smile and agreed, only turning away for a second to wave goodbye to Will before starting to walk alongside Mike in the opposite direction.

The first minute or so was spent in silence— Mike hadn't thought this plan far enough to actually know what he wanted to say to her— but an idea came to him when he saw her rearrange the books in her arms again. "Oh, let me carry those for you," he offered, and she handed the books over without protest. It wasn't that they were heavy or anything, or that he thought she was struggling, but his mother raised him to be a gentleman, so it was the least he could do.

"Thanks," she said gratefully, once again smiling his way. They were just passing in front of the pharmacy when she spoke up again. "You know, this kind of reminds me a little bit of when we met," she admitted, fiddling with the hanging straps of her book bag, which she was still carrying.

Mike only had to think about it for a second. As if he would forget the day he talked to her for the first time! "Oh yeah, that presentation

we had to do for history class, right?" She nodded. "I know what you mean. Except that one was about the Civil War," he pointed out, hoping he was remembering correctly. He'd been so spellbound by El that entire time they worked together, it was a miracle he'd managed to put words on a page, let alone finish the presentation to get a decent grade.

"Yeah," she confirmed, and Mike mentally patted himself in the back for getting it right.

There was silence again, but only for a few seconds, before Mike, scrambling to keep the conversation going, asked, "So, which one do you like better? Napoleon, or the Civil War?" In retrospect he imagined it was probably an odd question to ask, but he was genuinely curious. He wasn't really into history— and the parts of it he did like were usually more recent events, like the post-World War II order and the space race— but when it came to El, he wanted to know everything about her likes and dislikes, including something as trivial as this.

"Napoleon," she responded with a nod. "Definitely Napoleon. European history is just so much more... grand, don't you think?" she added with a wistful smile. "So many different cultures, with so many different ways of seeing the world..." She sighed, sounding content. "I really want to go there someday."

"To Europe?" he asked, for clarification.

"Mm-hmm," El hummed her assent, taking a deep breath as if she could smell the old continent in the air. "I've only seen it in pictures, but it must be so beautiful..." She sighed again, closing her eyes for a heartbeat before opening them. "Have you ever been outside of Indiana?"

"Yeah, I've been to other states to visit relatives," Mike told her, thinking back to family road trips with all five of them crammed into the station wagon, back when his mother was still its primary driver. "I've only gone as far as Florida, though. My sister— she's in college, and I think she's thinking of applying for a semester abroad next year, or the next one after that."

"That sounds amazing," El commented with a yearning groan.

"Yeah, Nancy gets to have all the fun," Mike said with a shrug. "Except if we win this thing and get to meet Brock Sorenson, I guess," he added. As far as he knew, Nancy had never tried a contest like this, let alone won it, so he was looking forward to actually having at least one thing he could brag about around her.

"She's a fan?" El asked, sounding curious.

"Not even a little," Mike retorted with a snort. Nancy had always been more partial to romantic movies, or anything with Tom Cruise or Rob Lowe in it. She always said that action movies focused too much on guns and explosions and too little on an actual plot to really grab her attention. "But she's never met a celebrity, so I still win," he appended with a chuckle. His comment made El laugh, too.

"You know what's funny?" she posited, swinging her arms back and forth as she walked. "This contest is so much more important in terms of what we get out of it, but it's still slightly less anxiety inducing than that first project we did about the Civil War."

"Why was that anxiety inducing? It was just a middle-school presentation," Mike asked, a bit confused. He hoped her anxiety back then had nothing to do with him—he'd never been considered intimidating in his entire life, and he would die if the first person to do so was the girl he'd had a crush on for years.

"Yes, but it was the *first* school presentation I ever did," El let him know, and that's when the chips started falling into place for him. "Remember that I was homeschooled before I moved to Hawkins?" He nodded. Of course he'd heard about that over the years, but he hadn't known about it back then. "That week had been my first week in public school, *ever*. I was terrified that the other kids were going to hate me, or that my classes would be too advanced for me and that I would flunk out miserably."

"Oh, man, I had no idea," Mike interjected, a little dismayed that he had not realized any of this back then. He would've been a lot more careful with everything he said to her—not that he wasn't already because he wanted her to like him, but he was pretty sure that

twelve-year-old Mike had spent most of that period babbling about random things because she was *so pretty* that it just sort of short-circuited his brain every time he looked at her.

(He hadn't gotten much better about that, either.)

"I hope I didn't do anything to make things worse for you, then," he told her sincerely. He knew back when he was younger he could be a total mouthbreather from time to time, but he would hate to have added to her insecurities, even unwittingly.

She shook her head emphatically, soft curls bouncing from side to side with the movement. "No, it was the opposite, actually," she said, once again directing that heartstopping smile his way. "You were really nice to me, and always explained things really clearly when there was something I didn't understand or had forgotten. It made me feel better about working with other kids from then on. Less scared," she admitted in a low tone.

"Oh," Mike breathed, not entirely sure why hearing that affected him so much, but his cheeks were flushed, and his heart was beating madly, and his stomach was doing funny flips, and his feet wanted to start skipping. "I'm... I'm glad," he said after clearing his throat, afraid that his voice would break.

"Me too," she said quietly. She was still smiling that beatific smile, but she wasn't looking at him anymore; instead, her gaze was fixed on the sidewalk in front of them. Mike could see the police station nearby already. "Actually," El spoke again after a few seconds of silence, "one could almost say that you were my first friend here."

Mike didn't know what to say to that— all he knew at the moment was that he felt like his soul had sprouted wings and was flying somewhere in the stratosphere, but he had no way of putting that feeling into words, so he remained quiet, her words echoing inside his mind and his heart.

The last minute or so of their walk was quiet, and when they stopped in front of the police station, he handed her back the two books. "Well, then," she said, looking up at him through her lashes. "I'll see you tomorrow at Will's, I guess."

"Yeah," he croaked through a suddenly parched throat. She gave him one last smile and turned to go inside, and that's when Mike's brain started screaming at him to do something; grab his chance, take the jump. "Hey, um, El?" he called out before she could take one step.

"Yes?" she said expectantly, turning back around to look at him again.

"Uh, I was wondering if, um..." he stuttered, barely making sense as it was. God, he was so bad at this. Why did he think asking her out at this exact moment was a good idea, again? "...if maybe you'd want to, I don't know—"

"Ellie bear!" came the holler from behind them and they both turned toward the door— Mike's mouth closing with a *clang*— to see Steve, aka Cadet Harrington, the newest recruit of the Hawkins Police Department, walking out the door of the station.

El sighed— Mike dared not even hope that it might be because she was as disappointed at the interruption as he was— but nonetheless put on a tight smile and turned to look at the newcomer. "Hi, Steve," she greeted him cursorily.

The older man walked over to them and threw an arm around El's shoulders comfortably. "Your pops was wondering why you were late. What are you doing out here?" His eyes narrowed as he turned his head to look at Mike. "...And with a boy?"

"Hi, Steve," Mike said with an unimpressed roll of his eyes. He and Steve knew each other from when Steve had dated Mike's older sister Nancy back in high school, but they'd never talked to each other much, and when they did they never really got along— mainly because Steve was such a douchebag back then. He was less annoying now, and had actually become good friends with Dustin, but Mike figured their interactions would always be somewhat tense.

"Wheeler number two," Steve replied in an equally unimpressed tone. He glanced at El for a second, then back at Mike. "You gotta watch out for this one, Ellie," he declared, signaling in Mike's direction with a nod of his chin. "Boys his age only have one thing on their minds."

"Steve!" El's face went as crimson as Max's hair, and Mike couldn't

blame her because he was sure he was red up to the tip of his ears.

"It's not *like that*—"

"Mm-hmm," Steve retorted, still glaring like he wasn't even paying attention to Mike's poor attempts to defend his integrity. "Come on, El. Flo's letting us have donuts with our afternoon coffee today because it's Friday."

Sending one more "I'm watching you" scowl Mike's way, he guided El around until they were both walking up to the main entrance to the police station. El only got a second to wave at him and mouth "See you tomorrow!" before Steve ushered her inside and out of sight.

It took Mike a couple of seconds to process everything that had happened, and then he sighed, hoping his furious blush would subside by the time he made it all the way back up Main street and to his car. The utter humiliation would persist for a few more hours, at least. Of that, he was pretty sure.

.
. .
.

Since the teenagers were going to take over the Byers house that Saturday night, Hopper and Joyce were going to get dinner elsewhere and leave them to their own devices for once. It was their first chance in a while to take some time to themselves, forgetting about their parental responsibilities for one night while they ate, shared a pack of cigs, reminisced about their high-school days...

"...and make out?" El interjected cheekily, earning herself a glare from her father as he parked the Blazer in the gravel driveway of Joyce's place.

El rolled her eyes. Fine; if he didn't want to admit that he was hopelessly in love with Will's mom, that was fine with El. God knew she'd carried her own torch for long enough without saying anything, so it's not like she had the high ground here or anything. She just hoped today's outing went well and their relationship took a step

forward, even if it was just a small one; sometimes that seemed like the hardest thing to do.

All the others were already there when she arrived. Will had ordered pizza for everyone— it should be there in about half an hour— and when Joyce was on the way out she reminded everyone that there was popcorn and soda in the kitchen for them to prepare whenever they felt like it.

Dustin was already bouncing all over the place, so they decided to start the movie even before the pizza got there. As Will and Lucas set up the VCR and Dustin and Max looked for the tape in Will's room, Mike volunteered to get the drinks and El seized her chance to get a minute alone with him.

After throwing a bag of Act II into the microwave, she turned to look at him as he poured Coke into one of six plastic cups he had laid out on the kitchen countertop. He was wearing a cream sweater with fall-colored accents that made the freckles on his cheeks stand out, and it looked so soft that every time he was within a foot of her she itched to reach out and touch it.

She bit her lip. She'd been so sure for a moment there yesterday that he was about to ask her out. If what Dustin had said about Mike liking her was true, then it was a definite possibility that he had been. But they were interrupted, and nothing more had happened between them since then.

Would things be different between them now if Steve hadn't made an appearance the day before? Would she be allowed to reach out and touch him like she longed to? She had to know. "Hey, Mike?" she called out as the kernels started to pop loudly inside the microwave behind her.

"Yeah?" he responded without looking up from the cups he was pouring soda into.

El took a few steps closer, resting a hand on the back of one of the kitchen-table chairs. "Yesterday when we were standing in front of the police station, you seemed like you were about to ask me something," she reminded him. "What was it?"

His head snapped up to look at her so fast she thought she heard a crack (it might've been the soda bottle, too), and his eyes widened as he realized what she was asking. "Oh, uh... I was..." His words stumbled for a moment as his eyes moved from her face to the living room, where their friends were arguing about what their favorite parts were of the movie they were just about to see.

"Ah, it was nothing," he finally declared, dragging his eyes back to where she was standing in front of him. "Don't worry about it."

El was disappointed, but she tried not to let it show. "Okay," she said, giving him a smile as the microwave beeped behind her, letting them know that the first bag of popcorn was ready now. "Um, you might want to..." she signaled down at the countertop delicately, because Mike was so preoccupied still staring at her that he hadn't noticed the cup he'd been filling was now full, and the liquid was spilling over the edge.

At her indication he looked down and realized what was happening. "Oh, shit! Dammit!" he exclaimed, immediately pulling the Coke bottle to an upright position and rushing to push the liquid back with his hands so it wouldn't drip down onto the floor.

"No!" El warned him. "Don't use your hands, you'll stain your clothes. Here," she ran to grab a roll of paper towels that was on a stand nearby the microwave. "Use these, they'll absorb the liquid faster." She hurriedly handed him a few pieces of the absorbent tissue paper and he quickly dropped them on top of the liquid, effectively stopping the flow of it and saving Joyce's kitchen floor from the inevitable stickiness it would've incurred.

"Oof. Thanks," Mike said with a relieved sigh. "That was quick thinking."

El chuckled and patted his forearm as he pressed down on the paper towels. They were standing that close. "I'm going to take the popcorn outside," she told him. "Let me know if you need any help with those cups." She turned to go take the popcorn out of the microwave, pressing her lips together as she opened the bag. Yes, his sweater was as soft as she had imagined it would be.

Handing two buckets of popcorn off to her friends, El took her seat—on the floor in front of Max's legs, since the couch that faced the TV was already occupied. She had to stretch her arm to grab popcorn from the bucket Dustin was holding but she didn't mind, so long as he didn't eat the whole thing.

"Freaking finally!" Max exclaimed when Mike appeared carrying a tray with all six cups about a minute later. "A little faster next time, garçon. We're burning daylight here."

"Maybe next time you can get your own damn drink, Mayfield," Mike retorted dryly as he handed over the cups, giving the last one to El as she was almost directly at his feet. "Where am I sitting?" He had to step over El's legs to take the spot between her and Dustin, so close to her that their hands would probably brush when they moved to pick up their soda cups.

"Alright," Dustin interjected, handing the popcorn bucket to Mike and then proceeding to rub his hands together eagerly. "Are we ready for this?"

Everybody cheered, with an added "Just play the damn movie already!" from Lucas. Dustin moved to the VCR so he could hit the play button, and as the credits rolled, everybody held their breath like they'd never seen this movie before.

Watching *Wizard for Hire* with this group was a completely unmatched experience for El. Normally she didn't like people talking during movies, but this time it felt different; the boys knew all the lines, which they would quote *constantly*, even attempting to imitate the characters' voices and intonations, leading to many hilarious moments. Whenever Brock's character unleashed a spell and killed off bad guys there would be cheering, whenever the bad guys got a leg up on Brock's character there would be booing, and there was lots of screaming "don't go in there, stupid!" or "how did he not see them?!" or "above your head, dumbass!" and other warnings the characters on the other side of the television screen never seemed to heed.

Brock's character had just unleashed his largest fireball spell on a bunch of vampires when the doorbell rang, and the ensuing collective groan made El think that she had never heard anyone sound so

dismayed about getting pizza for dinner before in her life.

Dustin paused the movie so that Will could go get the pizza, and Mike went back to the kitchen to get everyone some disposable plates — Joyce was nice, but she wouldn't be happy if someone stained her furniture with pizza grease. When he sat back down beside her, El couldn't help but notice that he was a little closer than he'd been before. She wondered if he had done that on purpose. She hoped he did.

The pizza was distributed around and the movie resumed, the exuberance from earlier coming right back except a little bit grosser because Dustin didn't know how to react without talking with his mouth full. El tried to keep her eyes fixed on the screen rather than on the fact that her hand and Mike's, both of them resting on the carpet beside their thighs, were only about half an inch apart.

Dustin and Lucas started up an argument about whether the leader of the vampires would be more difficult to find than the pack of lycanthropes because vampires have echolocation and can hear Brock's character coming, but El wasn't paying attention because her pinky finger was moving oh so close to Mike's, millimeter by millimeter. Another fight scene came on screen and the rest of their friends let out a cheer, but she noticed Mike remained quiet, and she thought that might be because he realized how close they were to touching.

Feeling buoyed by his reaction (or rather the lack of it?), she decided to bridge the gap, slowly but surely moving her hand left until the side of her pinky finger was resting against Mike's. She watched him out of the corner of her eye and saw that his posture didn't change at all, but then she saw him start to smile, and next thing she knew, his own pinky had lifted up and was softly rubbing against hers in a way that sent shivers down her spine.

She had to bite her bottom lip to keep back the bright grin that threatened to break on her face. It didn't really work. She had a feeling she was going to be smiling for the rest of the night.

Unfortunately for that bubbly feeling in her stomach, that was when the scene they were waiting for— the one that pertained to the

scavenger hunt clue— was just about to come up. Will was quick to point it out, interrupting Lucas and Dustin's very elaborate argument with a "Guys, guys, shush! This is it, this is the scene!" as all of them waited on bated breath to see what exactly was in the background when Brock's character was told by the vampire messenger about the assassination plot.

"Is that... the entrance to Central Park?" Mike asked, his hand still resting against El's but having gone still as everyone's attention snapped back to the movie. He was reading the letters on an archway Brock's character was standing in front of. The shot was quick but pretty clear. There was no misreading it.

Someone on the couch gasped, and then all six of them exclaimed in unison, in such uncanny harmony that it probably would've been hilarious to anyone looking from the outside in: "The park!"

They had their where. Now they just needed to figure out the what.

.
.
.

The following Monday, Mike was putting his books into his locker when he spotted Lucas running like a madman from the main entrance in his direction. "Hey, where were you? I waited for you," he called out to him.

Since they lived so close, he and Lucas usually carpooled to school, and today it had been Mike's turn to drive, but he had waited for Lucas for over ten minutes and he never made an appearance. Mike had assumed he was sick or something, and eventually had no choice but to drive to school without him.

"Never mind that," Lucas said, barely managing to stop his momentum before he crashed headfirst into the lockers in front of Mike. "Track field bleachers. Now."

Mike frowned. "What? We can't go now, first period's about to start —"

"I'm serious, Mike, this is a code red!" Lucas insisted, and it was the "code red" label that convinced Mike that something important was going on. They only used "code red" in the direst of situations. "I'm gonna get the others. If you see any of them, tell them to meet me there. El and Max, too."

He ran off before Mike could ask him anything else, and he figured he might as well make his way to the bleachers, then, if it was such a big deal. He found Dustin along the way and told him, and the two of them headed toward the back door. They met Max and El, who had already been approached by Lucas, as they turned the corner toward the exit.

"What's this all about?" El asked him as they walked behind the school toward the track field.

"Beats me," Mike replied, "but it's gotta be important. Lucas said it was a code red."

"Oh, you gotta be freaking kidding me," Max interjected suddenly, and for a moment Mike thought she was talking to him and was about to protest, but then he saw what she was looking at: under the bleachers, at the exact spot where Lucas said to meet, stood two sophomores with their tongues so far down each other's throats, it was a miracle they weren't both choking.

Max increased her pace, separating herself from the group until she stopped some five feet away from the overenthusiastic pair. "Seriously?" she asked out loud, arms crossed, causing the two underclassmen to spring apart abruptly. She glared at them. "You couldn't keep it in your pants until lunch like the rest of us normal people? Scram!" The two younger kids threw her a dirty look but decided to go elsewhere either way.

"Man, I want to be like Max when I grow up," Dustin said with a chuckle as the three of them approached their redheaded friend, now standing alone under the bleachers. Before Mike or El could comment further, however, they heard someone else approaching from behind, and they turned to see Lucas and Will running toward them.

"Oh, we're all here, good," Lucas said as they approached. He was

carrying a book with him— Mike assumed it was one of the two books he had taken out on loan from the library on Friday. *Interesting History* was the title; Mike was barely able to read it before Lucas moved to open the tome. "Guys, we've been going about this all wrong," he declared. "It's not the British."

"But," Mike countered, "the first battle that Napoleon fought after the Treaties of Tilsit was—"

"—the battle of the Sables d'Olonne, yes," Lucas agreed, confusing everyone for a moment. And then, "But the clue doesn't talk about a *battle*, does it? It just says Napoleon was *attacked* by some group," he pointed out as he browsed quickly through the book.

"What's the difference?" Will asked, not following. Mike didn't either, so he waited for Lucas to explain.

"The difference is that the group that attacked Napoleon doesn't have to be an army," Lucas noted, finally finding a page that he had previously marked. "They don't even have to be human," he added, cryptically.

"It's aliens, isn't it?" Dustin asked eagerly. "We're gonna have to find aliens."

"Dustin..." Mike sighed, covering his face with his hands. Lucas just rolled his eyes and shook his head, handing the book over to the nearest person, who turned out to be El, and asking her to read the paragraph he had marked with a post-it note.

"Napoleon's most memorable— and humiliating— defeat," El began reading, "came at the hands, well, the *paws* of a fearsome band of... bunny rabbits?" she finished the sentence as a question, clearly surprised by what she was reading.

"The bizarre moment in European history," she continued after giving pause for everyone's similar expressions of confusion and disbelief, "happened in July of 1807, after Napoleon signed the Treaties of Tilsit, officially marking the end of the war between the French Empire and Imperial Russia. To celebrate the occasion, he proposed a rabbit hunt with his men and some military big-wigs."

She read a couple more paragraphs, detailing how Napoleon ordered the preparation of said celebratory hunt, before getting to the crux of the matter. "...something bizarre happened: The rabbits didn't scamper away in fear. Quite the opposite: They bounded toward Napoleon and his hunting party, not unlike revolutionary rowdies storming the Bastille. Napoleon and his buddies soon found themselves bombarded with a barrage of fluffy bunnies. Imagine Hitchcock's *The Birds* recast with rabbits instead of crows."

By this point everyone was cracking up. "Napoleon was attacked by bunnies?" Dustin was bent over and slapping his thighs, he was laughing so hard. "Oh, geez..."

"So, we have to find a rabbit in a park?" Max asked, wiping tears from her eyes as her own giggles tempered down. "That makes a little bit more sense." She was right; wild Cottontail rabbits had been known to wander out of the forest and pop up around town every once in a while, and it wouldn't be strange to find one in a green area like a park. They'd have to be really lucky for a rabbit to be around at the exact same time they were looking for it, of course, but at least it wasn't *impossible*.

"Yeah, but we still don't know which park we're supposed to go to," Lucas reminded them. There was no Central Park in Hawkins and there were multitudes of parks big and small around town that could fit the bill. "There's gotta be something we're missing that will point us to the right one."

"Guys..." Will intervened suddenly, sounding like he'd had a revelation. "There's a bunny-shaped springer at the playground in Liberty Park." His eyes widened as everyone turned to look at him, expressions ranging from intrigued to skeptical. "No, really. I remember because my mother mentions all the time that she used to take me there when I was little and I *hated* it. She even has a photo of me somewhere on it and I'm *screaming* bloody murder."

"Aww," Max cooed, chuckling. "That's cute. But why do you hate bunnies, Will? What'd they ever do to you?" she teased as the rest of them laughed.

"I was three!" Will retorted defensively, but he was grinning, too, so

they knew he wasn't *really* upset. "It had a creepy smile, okay? It freaked me out."

"That's gotta be it, though," Lucas declared, and Mike had to agree. Trying to find a real rabbit and corral it so they could take a photo while at a local park sounded ridiculously complicated— too complicated and random for a contest like this. The idea of the rabbit in question being part of a playground made much more sense.

Moreover, it was the only real option they had at the moment. They could still be wrong; it could be some other rabbit-shaped object in some other park, and if this wasn't it, they were back to square one. But it was the only lead they had, so they had to at least try it.

They drove over to Liberty Park as soon as the school day was over, and found the springer straight away in the middle of the playground. There were a few mothers with their children around and they convinced one of them to take Mike's camera and get a polaroid of them with the bunny springer. They made Will sit on it, of course— he was smiling this time— and swore to make an extra copy to give to Joyce so she could have a before and after.

The next day, they all waited in the hallway outside Ms. Tanaka's office as Dustin went in to submit the photo and, hopefully, retrieve the flyer with the next clue if this one was correct. It seemed to take forever until Dustin finally turned around and gave them a not-so-discreet thumbs up.

He shouldn't have bothered trying to be circumspect, frankly, because the cheer that broke out a second later grabbed the attention of Ms. Tanaka and everybody else who happened to be walking down that hallway. The Guidance Counselor smiled at them for a moment, amused, before sending them all off to first period, and Dustin didn't get the chance to check out the next clue until he was sitting in geography class some fifteen minutes later, completely unable to focus on the professor's lecture about the Rockies.

.

.

Notes: *Wizard for Hire* is, in my head at least, inspired by Jim Butcher's urban-fantasy series *The Dresden Files*, in which a wizard named Harry Dresden defends Chicago from all kind of supernatural threats. It's one of my favorite book series, and it sounds like something the boys would be into.

Act II is a well-known brand of microwavable popcorn initially made and distributed by Golden Valley Microwave Foods and later purchased by ConAgra Brands. It was the first mass-marketed microwave popcorn in the world, first introduced as a follow-up to Act I in 1984 when they figured out a way to make the butter flavor shelf-stable.

The Battle of Les Sables-d'Olonne ("The sands of Olonne") was a naval battle fought between Napoleon's French Navy and a British squadron of ships on February 24th, 1809. It was one of the first battles fought after Napoleon signed the Treaties of Tilsit in July 1807, which temporarily ceased hostilities between France and the nations of Russia and Prussia. And yes, Napoleon was indeed attacked by bunnies later that same month. The text El reads from the history book was lifted directly from The Vintage News (just Google "Napoleon rabbits" and you should find TVN easily), so all credit to them. *The Birds* is a 1963 horror-thriller film directed by Alfred Hitchcock in which people get attacked by, well, birds.

Happy Thanksgiving weekend to everyone who celebrates the holiday! Up next week: Sports. You can bet the boys are going to *love* that one. xD

4. Clue 3: Sports

Searching For Your Heart, Clue #3: Sports. PG-13, romance/fluff/friendship, no-powers AU, Mike/Eleven.

One of the world's biggest action movie superstars is coming to town, and every kid in Hawkins High is determined to win MTV's back-to-school scavenger hunt and get a face-to-face meeting with their idol. Mike and his friends are sure they've got this in the bag— until the contest throws a wrench in their plans and their only shot at winning is partnering up with Mike's longtime crush, El Hopper.

Note: The clues for the Scavenger Hunt are actual clues (well, except for the ones relating to Brock Sorenson because those are obviously just made up). You might get a kick out of them if you're into trivia or that kind of stuff— be sure to let me know in a comment if you solve them before the kids do here!

Note 2: This is a high-school AU where Eleven doesn't have her powers, but it still takes place in the 80s because the internet would make it way too easy, lol. xD

.

.

Because they were already concerned they had fallen behind schedule after it took them a week to solve the second clue, they decided to hit the ground running on the third one. They huddled together on a table in a corner of the cafeteria during lunch, per Dustin's (paranoid) request that they only talk where they weren't likely to be overheard; he didn't want some other team stealing their ideas. There were still people around in the cafeteria, but at least if they kept their voices down, anyone wanting to spy on them would have to walk up too close to go unnoticed.

"Which team sport is played on the biggest pitch in terms of area?" Will read from the flyer Dustin had handed him a minute earlier, a frown marking his face as he put it down on the table in front of him. "Anyone know enough about sports to hazard a guess?"

Everyone automatically turned to Max, who was the only one among them who actually played a sport. The redhead simply shrugged. "Don't look at me. I've always thought it was football, but something tells me that would be too easy to be true," she said, and it actually made a lot of sense.

"What if it *is* football, though?" Dustin input pensively from the opposite side of the table. "I mean, people measure things in 'football fields,' right? If they're going to use it as a measurement unit for things that are really, really large, it stands to reason that it's the largest sports field there is."

"What if it's just the most common?" Max retorted, shaking her head. "Every town has at least one football field around. People love football. It might just be that they like using something they know and love as a measurement unit." She crossed her arms. "Like, we measure distances in feet, but it's not because a foot is the largest unit of measure for distance. It's because everybody has feet, and that makes it easier to visualize."

"Dammit. You're right," Dustin agreed, throwing down his used napkin on top of his food tray and leaning back in his seat with a pout. Mike couldn't blame him; they'd all been hoping this clue would be an easy one, but of course they just weren't that lucky.

"So we've got no choice, then," Mike declared, not seeing any other options at the moment. "We're going to have to go back to the library." The collective groan that resounded after his words was a testament to how stressful this contest was for all of them. Normally they wouldn't mind spending time in the library, but they'd spent so much time there lately, even nerds could get a little sick of that. (He also did not miss Dustin's mutter about being on the receiving end of more glares from the librarian.) "What about the location clue?"

"Where was Brock Sorenson born?" Will diligently read.

"That one's easy," Lucas intervened, perking up for the first time since this meeting was convened. "He's from Boise, right?" he asked, hopeful.

"Uh-uh," Max retorted quickly with a sharp shake of her head, and

Mike thought she looked completely certain of her negative. "He *grew up* in Boise, but he wasn't born there. It was some other town in Idaho. A suburb of Boise, I'm pretty sure, because I remember thinking that the place sounded a lot like Hawkins. I think it was called..." She thought about it for a few seconds, and everybody stared at her expectantly while she did, but then she sighed. "Sorry, guys. I don't remember the name," she admitted, disappointed.

"It's okay," Lucas said, nudging her gently with his shoulder in a sign of support. "We can't expect you to know every single detail." And Mike knew he was right; Max was by far the one out of the group who knew the most about Brock's life, but there was no way she could know every single detail. Which meant...

"We're going to have to go back to the magazines, too," El was the one to vocalize his thoughts, and Mike couldn't help but smile; moments like that made him feel like he and El were on the same wavelength, almost, and that always made him cheer on the inside.

He was about to express his agreement when an unexpected voice rang out behind them. "Jesus, Hopper. I knew you were a bleeding heart, but hanging out with the nerds? This is a new low, even for you. If you needed a project, couldn't you just volunteer at a children's hospital or something?" the person said derisively.

Mike saw Max, Lucas and Will's simultaneous glares before he saw the person; when he turned to look over his shoulder, that's when he realized who it was. Stacey, the school's head cheerleader and unofficial queen bee was the one who had spoken, a hand on her hip as she looked down at the six of them. Troy, the school's most notorious bully, who Stacey had been dating on and off through their high school years (there was more drama in that relationship than on a daytime soap), was beside her, an arm thrown lazily around her shoulders like intending to mark her as his property. James and a couple other of their flunkies stood nearby, laughing sycophantically at Stacey's dumb comment as flunkies were expected to do.

El, who was sitting on the other side of Dustin, had to turn around to look at the newcomers, too, but her glare was ready to go as soon as she heard Stacey speak. Mike had to admit to himself that the words hurt. Yes, he and his friends were nerds, and for the most part he was

unapologetic about it; he didn't care if the popular kids looked down on them, he knew who he was and liked it that way. But the reminder that he was so far from where El was standing on the social spectrum made him feel an acute pinprick of shame he wasn't used to feeling most of the time.

El and Max were leaps and bounds more popular than the boys could ever hope to be. Not in the same way the cheerleaders and the jocks were popular, no; the two of them pretty much made up their own clique, but they got along with everyone and often hung out with different people from different groups without caring for the social hierarchy. El was especially well-liked because she liked helping people in many different ways— from tutoring to babysitting, volunteering to get signatures for student government, or even contributing to bake sales for sports teams' away trips.

The only people Mike knew for sure they didn't get along with (and this was only after hearing Max rant about them a number of times through their time working together) were Stacey and her little goblins. He didn't know what the backstory was for any of it, but he couldn't remember her or Max ever voluntarily socializing with Stacey, Troy, or their cronies, even when they hung out with the rest of the cheerleaders or the jocks. Hearing Stacey snobbily talk down to her like she did everyone else made Max's rants make a little bit more sense, but at the same time it also dampened his excitement about teaming up with her, just a little.

He didn't want to drag her down to his and his friends' level. Wherever Stacey went, the eyes of the entire school followed, and today was no exception; Mike could feel the gaze of everyone seated in nearby tables on them as this all went down, so he knew people were paying attention. And while he didn't mind being reminded that he and his friends were on the lowest rung of the high school social ladder, he didn't want people to start thinking less of El for associating with them. And he knew at least a few of them would.

El didn't seem to have any such reservations. "They're not my *project*, Stacey," she retorted defiantly. "They're my friends."

Stacey scoffed like she couldn't wrap her brain around such a thing. "That's cute," she said sarcastically. "Well, it's *your* social suicide. If

you want to lose people's respect for a pity fuck with a nerd, then that's your—"

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike saw Max spring to her feet with a ferocity that was almost scary. "If you don't shut the hell up right now, you bitch, I swear to God—"

Mike, almost afraid that she was going to lunge across the table in a mad grab for Stacey's carefully-teased locks, stood up as well. "It's not like that," he said as loudly as he could, wanting to make sure everybody around them who was riveted on the scene could hear what he was saying. "El and Max are working with us on the Brock Sorenson scavenger hunt. That's why we're sitting together today. Nothing more."

"Hey, look, babe," Troy intervened for the first time since they had approached the table. "They're doing the scavenger hunt, too!" Mike's stomach dropped. It's not that he was worried Troy and his flunkies could outsmart them— the dude was failing every subject except PE, there were rumors going around that he was about to be kicked off the football team and Mike didn't feel one bit sorry for him if the rumors were true— but he had money and influence, and did not like to lose. If Troy and his friends were also participating in the contest, then Mike's team had their work cut out for them.

Troy lifted his arm off his girlfriend's shoulder. "Let's see where you losers are at, shall we?" He leaned forward in front of Dustin to grab at the flyer Will still had lying on the table in front of him. They protested feebly as he lifted it up to his face to read it. "Oh yeah, we're almost done with this one already. We have a college student who does all the reading for us and he's already found the right answer."

Dustin glared up at him. "That's cheating!"

"Yeah, and who's going to tell them, huh, Toothless? You?" he glowered down at Dustin, who shrank back into his seat, jaw clenched. Mike didn't blame him. They all knew Troy was more than capable of making their lives a living hell if they ratted him out—and that was only if he decided not to punch the living daylights out of them before that. No use confronting him; they would just have to

beat him.

"You shouldn't even bother, anyway," Troy added, crumpling the flyer in his fist and throwing it down on the table so that it hit Will on the chest when it bounced. "There's no way in hell you're beating us. What do you even know about sports, anyway? You're three nerds and a queer," he finished, sneering in Will's direction.

"Shut up, Troy," Mike growled immediately. It was one thing not to confront Troy when it came to the contest, but he wasn't going to just let him mess with his friends.

Unfortunately, he was too far away from where Troy was standing to really be able to do anything. "Oh, you wanna defend your little boyfriend, Frogface?" He sneered in Mike's direction before leaning in to talk directly to Will. "Bet the only thing the little fairy knows about sports comes from playing dolls with the rest of the girls."

"Stop it, Troy!" This time it was El who confronted him, obviously aware of how agitated Will was getting while sitting directly in front of her.

Troy turned his head to deride El instead. "Or what, Hopper?" he asked, his words dripping with contempt. "You gonna fight me?"

Mike fumed. Max looked like she wanted to lunge across the table again. But El had this. "No, I'm not going to fight you," she retorted, looking straight at Troy without faltering for a second. "But I can tell my dad, *the chief of police*, that you and your friends smoke pot every Friday afternoon in the alley behind the gym. I'm sure he'd be *real* interested in finding out who your dealer is."

Troy scowled at her and looked like he was about to say something even more aggressive, but that seemed to be the moment Will couldn't take the taunting anymore and he pushed off his seat, never meeting any of his friends' gazes, and ran off between the tables in the direction of the cafeteria door.

They all called out to him worriedly, but El was still glaring at Troy. "Leave us alone, you assholes," she spat out, turning her glare back on Stacey for a second for good measure, before pushing off her seat

herself and following Will out of the room.

Mike turned to Troy again, fuming mad, but at the same time amazed by how El had stood up to him in a way he himself never had been able to. She was amazing, and he just needed to pick up on the thread she left hanging. "You heard her, Troy," he warned his tormentor. "If you don't want to end up behind bars, you better go. Now."

Troy took a step closer to him and sneered. Despite the fact that Troy was broader, Mike was taller, and the picture of him glowering at him didn't look half as intimidating as it had in middle school. And Troy knew it. He was never going to admit it out loud, but he knew it.

"Come on, babe," he said to Stacey, who was still looking down her nose at all of them like she smelled something that stank. "They're never going to beat us to the contest, anyway." Stacey threw out one last scoff before Troy grabbed her by the arm and pulled her toward another table, where the rest of their friends were sitting.

The cafeteria seemed unnaturally silent. Mike could still feel the gazes of dozens of his classmates on him and there was a tension in the environment that didn't immediately go away simply because the moment was over. Or at least there was until Max quipped, "Well, *there's* a domestic disturbance call waiting to happen," and suddenly everything around them seemed like it started moving again.

Max shook her head. "I'm going to go look for them," she said, obviously worried about El and the way she'd run off after Will like that.

Mike felt the same way, about both his friends. "I'll come with," he declared, and they walked out of the cafeteria together. They used the last few minutes of their lunch break to look for any sign of their friends on the main school building, but they never found them. Will's bike was gone from the bike rack at the front of the school. They tried calling on the payphone near the main entrance, but no one was picking up either at the Byers' or at the Hoppers'.

Max wanted to go look for them, but she had to stay after school for

a softball team meeting, and Mike had to be around for his geography class because their teacher was handing out their semester assignments that day. They could only hope wherever they were, Will and El were okay.

.
.
.
Initially they had wanted to go back to Will's place, but they didn't want to risk Joyce stopping by and realizing they were skipping school (sometimes she forgot her lunch and had to drive all the way back home to get it, Will said, so it was best to just avoid his house altogether). Hopper, in contrast, was more likely to spend the entire day at work, so they decided to bike over to El's house, instead.

For the first hour or so, they'd watched TV and gorged on junk food in an attempt to think about anything but what happened at the cafeteria. What Troy had said to Will hurt, but El knew it wasn't really about Troy. It was about Will himself, and the fact that underneath Troy's taunts, there was a truth he wasn't ready to face; at least not in front of anyone who wasn't El.

Once they got tired of daytime soaps, they moved to El's bedroom, and that's when El figured they would really get to talk about it. "See? This is why you need to tell people," she muttered an awkward conversation starter as she carefully shoved a plastic stopper underneath her door so that it wouldn't close. "So that I don't have to always make sure my bedroom door remains open whenever a boy visits."

Will, who was stretched out on El's bed, with his feet crossed near the headboard and his head hanging off the front end, chuckled. "That's right, I bet your dad doesn't make you keep the door open when Max comes over, right?" he asked, amused. El was happy she was able to put him out of his funk, at least a little. "I'm so sorry that my reluctance to come out to your family has inconvenienced your life," he added sarcastically, which made El laugh, this time around.

"Seriously, though," she said once the mirth died down, moving away from the door and toward the bed. She sat down beside him on the bed, bringing her feet up on the mattress. "You should really consider telling the parents. Your mom, at least. You know she wouldn't mind, and she would want to know. And even if she tells my dad, he won't care," she assured him. She knew her dad had a loud bark, but he was really a cuddly teddy bear on the inside and he genuinely cared about Will. There's no way he would reject him; he would never hurt Joyce that way.

Will sighed. "You really think so? I'm just..." He shook his head. "I know nothing's *actually* happened between them yet, but this could be a really good thing for my mom. I don't want... I don't want my issues to ruin it for her," he admitted somewhat reluctantly, and El could see that this was really weighing on him.

"They won't," she insisted. "He won't mind. And neither will your friends. You know that, right?" She looked down at him pointedly for a heartbeat before letting herself fall back on the bed opposite him, her feet crossed beside his head. She heard Will hum his assent under his breath, but he didn't sound entirely convinced. "You could tell Mike, at least," she suggested. "I'm sure he'd understand."

Will scoffed. "Of *course* you have to say that. You *loooooove* him."

El groaned loudly pulling her legs up to curl into herself. "I do not!" she exclaimed, even though, of course, she totally did. It was a reflex. "And what is it, exactly, that I'm doing that has you and Max so convinced that I've got a thing for Mike?" she wondered out loud. Was she being too obvious? She wanted Mike to get the hint, of course, but at the same time she didn't want to seem like she was trying too hard. That would be embarrassing.

Will sat up, rolling his eyes. "We just know you," he said, giving her a pointed look that made her groan some more. "And speaking of telling people things," he added, "you should put us out of our misery and just ask him out. Who knows, he might say yes."

It was El's turn to sigh. "Dustin told me Mike likes me," she admitted a little bashfully, hugging her pillow to her chest. She saw Will snort. "I just don't know if he meant that he likes me *like that*, or if he just

likes me as a friend."

She looked up at Will, large eyes peering at him from above the edge of her pillow, hoping against hope that he would confirm which of the two circumstances was the correct one. Much to her disappointment, Will's expression didn't change at all, and she figured that he wasn't going to say one way or another. "All I can tell you is: go for it," he said, poking her in the arm with one finger as if to emphasize his point. "You won't know for sure until you take the leap."

"I could say the same thing to you," she turned his words around on him, sitting up Indian style so she could be face to face with him. "You should really tell someone, Will. It's obvious that holding it in is eating you up inside," she added softly, not wanting to pressure him into doing something he didn't want to do, but at the same time genuinely believing that revealing his long-held secret to his loved ones would make him feel better, freer.

"I thought that's what you were supposed to be here for," he said, crossing his arms and giving her a mock glare. She knew he was just teasing, but she really was glad he had confided in her. It had brought them much closer, and she was glad to help him in any way she could. She just thought he deserved to be himself with all the other important people in his life, as well.

"Yeah, well, there's only so much I can do—"

What she was about to say was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. Her eyes immediately went to the digital clock on her nightstand— 3:30, way too early for her dad to be home— and then she stood up, walking over to her window, which had a view of the front porch of the house, and the familiar figure standing on it.

"It's Mike," she informed Will as she made her way to her bedroom door, intent on going downstairs to let Mike in. She heard Will follow her, and she wondered if maybe he was thinking about what she said — that he should tell Mike. As far as El could tell he'd come alone, none of his friends were with him and she assumed Max was still at school for her softball meet, so this could be Will's best chance, but of course she wasn't going to say anything if he wasn't ready.

"El? Will?" she heard Mike call out from the opposite side of the door as they made their way down the stairs. "Can I come in?" There was silence for a couple of seconds before he added, "I know you guys are here. Will's bike is parked outside."

Something about the way he said that last part made her laugh, so she was smiling by the time she opened the door. "Hi, Mike," she said, noticing the relieved look on Mike's face when he saw the two of them in the foyer.

"Hey," he said hesitantly, his gaze sliding from her to Will, who was standing a few feet behind her. "Are you guys okay?" he asked. "You left so suddenly... we were worried."

"We're okay," she assured him. "Just needed some time to ourselves. But we're good now. Do you want to come in?" He nodded and she stepped aside to let him across the threshold, watching him intently as he looked around the place. It was the first time he'd actually been inside her house, and that felt meaningful to her, even though she'd never quite imagined it would be under these circumstances.

Will looked at him as well, and for a split second it seemed like he wanted to say something, but then he thought better about it and, still serious, turned on his heel to walk toward the living room, where he dropped himself on the couch. Mike's eyes followed him, worried. "Is he...?" he started to ask, then trailed off.

"I think..." El started, even though she didn't really know what he'd been about to ask. "I think he wants to tell you something," she said, hoping that was vague enough that it would ease Mike's worries but still allow Will to back out of the big reveal if he wanted to. "Come on."

They went into the living room, Mike sitting on the couch a couple of feet away from Will, and El by herself on the love seat perpendicular to the sofa. They were silent for a while, Mike and El waiting patiently for Will to initiate the conversation, but Mike's patience only lasted so long and after just a few seconds, he started speaking. "Will, you know you don't have to listen to any of that bullshit Troy was saying, right?" he asked, urgently trying to reassure his friend. "He just does it to get a rise out of you because he's a jackass. And

anyone who believes him is a jackass as well."

Will closed his eyes for a heartbeat, took a deep breath, and started, "Mike—"

But Mike was on a roll, and would not stop speaking. "And I'm sure if you just tell them it isn't true, they'll definitely—"

"I can't," Will interrupted loudly, and this time Mike did cut himself off mid-sentence.

"...What?" he asked, not understanding what Will meant. Will, now almost certainly wishing he had never spoken, turned terrified, wide eyes on El. She tried her best to be supportive, giving him a smile as she nodded her head encouragingly. No turning back now. The truth was almost out, and once it was all out there, everything would be better for him. She was sure of it.

Will nodded back at her, seeming to pluck up enough courage to take the leap. "I can't tell them it isn't true," he clarified his words from a minute ago, turning to look at Mike with a determined set to his jaw. "Because it is true."

Mike looked confused only for a second longer as realization began to set in. His jaw went slack, mouth partially open in surprise as he reacted with an "...Oh." For a second El feared that he was going to say the wrong thing, but she really shouldn't have worried, because then Mike shook his head— as if shaking himself out of the shock— and said, "That's... that's okay, Will. That's totally okay." He still sounded a little hesitant, like he didn't quite know what to say, but at least he was trying.

Will still looked like he was holding his breath. "...Is it, really?" he asked in a small voice. El wanted to give him a hug, but she also didn't want to interrupt.

"Yeah, absolutely," Mike reiterated, this time seeming completely certain of what he was saying. He slid a little closer to Will on the couch, and El smiled. "Will, I just want you to be happy, whatever that means. Okay? You've been my best friend since forever. This doesn't change anything."

El couldn't be sure, but she thought that something about what Mike said struck a chord within Will, because he drew in a deep, shaky breath and his eyes watered, but he nodded. "Yeah," he said, a little choked up, and then abruptly pushed himself to his feet. "I'll be right back," he said, then walked around the couch and out of the room, in the direction, El assumed, of the nearest bathroom.

Mike watched him go, a little confused by the sudden movement. "Um. Should we...?" he asked, signaling with his hand in the direction Will disappeared.

El shook her head. "He'll be fine, I think," she said, shrugging lightly. "It's just... emotional."

"Yeah," Mike agreed, still looking in the direction Will had left. "I mean... wow," he added, obviously still processing the news. It would probably take him a while, El figured, but he'd get there, and he and Will would be okay. He turned to look at her then. "You knew?" he asked.

El nodded. "Yeah, he told me a couple of months ago," she admitted, bringing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around her calves. She saw him think that through for a couple of seconds before he chuckled. "What?" she asked, wondering what was so funny.

He shook his head with a curious-looking smile, amused but also a little bit sad. It didn't really matter what the smile meant, it still made butterflies flutter in El's stomach. "Nothing, it's just..." He chuckled again. "While I was driving here, I kept telling myself that I shouldn't be jealous of Will. Now I'm wondering if I should've been jealous of you, instead. In a different way, of course," he added at the end, though it didn't help El understand what he meant any more easily.

"Why would you be jealous?" she asked, curious but also hopeful. Could it be that he was jealous of Will... because of her? Of course nothing was happening between her and Will, but could Mike have thought...? And if he had, what did that mean?

He leaned back against the backrest of the couch with a sigh. "Well, Will and I have been best friends since the first day of kindergarten,

you know. And this *just...*" He shook his head. "Don't take this the wrong way— I'm glad he told someone, I'm just wondering... why he came to you with this, rather than me. Or any of the guys, really."

She could see where he was coming from— it had surprised her, too, that she was the first person in their age group Will felt he could tell. But she'd thought about it a little, and Will's reaction just now had confirmed a few of her suspicions. "I think... I think that might be why," she explained, Mike attentively watching her as she did so. "Will and I are friends, but we don't have years and years of established routines that mean so much to him as he does with you guys. It's okay if me knowing changed things between us, but he wouldn't be able to handle if it changed things between you," she tried to explain.

"I think he just... doesn't want things to change," she added, leaning her chin on her knees as she watched him think about everything she was saying. She smiled when she remembered something. "And, hey, if it makes you feel any better, Jonathan knew before I did. We think he's told Nancy, but she's never brought it up, so we're not entirely sure."

Mike let out a pained groan that sent El into a fit of giggles. "Great. My sister knew before I did! I am never going to hear the end of this," he huffed grumpily. "That makes me feel a lot better, thanks for that," he added sarcastically, which only made El laugh harder.

He was starting to grin along with her laughter when she remembered what she'd wanted to know in the first place. "Um, why..." she started, clearing her throat halfway through. "Why... were you jealous of Will?" she finally asked, looking away from him timidly.

"Oh, uh..." He looked away abruptly, too, but she could see his cheeks flush, and it made the butterflies in her tummy come back full force. "Because..." he started but trailed off, pursing his lips. Then his gaze moved upward again and his eyes met hers shyly. "Because he gets to spend more time with you," he admitted, and the sweet smile he gave her drew an overjoyed grin from her. Her stomach was still doing flips, but she couldn't look away from him if she tried.

She bit her lip, trying to think of something to say— *take the leap, El* — when Will came back into the living room. "Sorry about that," he told them, seemingly not noticing the way they all-too-quickly snapped out of their shared gaze, blushing up to the tip of their ears.

Will's eyes were red, El noticed, as was his nose, and she wondered if he'd been crying in the bathroom before washing his face clear of tears. That immediately sobered her up. She was glad Mike seemed to return her feelings— she *hoped* that's what his words meant— but this wasn't the right time to think about that. This moment was about Will. "Are you okay?" she asked him, a bit worried, but he shook his head promptly.

"I'm fine," he assured her with a smile that seemed genuine, and El figured he'd dealt with the onslaught of emotions on his own. Regardless, she stood up to give him a hug, and Mike was right there to give him one of his own when they broke apart. She thought she heard him tell Will something in a mumble but she couldn't parse out what it was; she did see Will nod and give him a bright smile when they parted. Despite the red eyes, he seemed his normal, animated self.

"I was thinking, since we're both here anyway, we could keep working on the scavenger hunt clue," he suggested. "El has all her magazines here; we can look for the place where Brock was born." He walked around the couch to sit back down where he'd been before he left. "We could call the others over if you want, too. If that's okay, El?"

She didn't mind, as long as working on their project allowed Will to stop thinking about what happened in the cafeteria and focus on other things. Better things. Her dad might be a little overwhelmed when he arrived and found his house overrun with teenagers, but he'd understand. They called Lucas over, who said he'd pick up Dustin, and Max drove over after her softball practice on her own, probably worried as Mike had been.

.

.

Mike wasn't expecting Will to tell everyone the same day, and was mentally preparing himself to keep the secret for as long as Will wanted him to, but Will surprised both him and El by telling the others nearly as soon as everyone arrived. El figured later on— and she was much better at figuring this stuff out than he was, so he automatically deferred to her intuition— that he was just tired of holding it in for so long, and Mike's positive reaction had given him hope that the rest of his friends wouldn't mind, either. It sounded right to Mike's ears.

Dustin and Lucas reacted much in the same way Mike had, which made his own reaction feel a little less inadequate in his mind. He'd been caught by surprise, and he worried that he might've unintentionally hurt Will, even if he said he was fine. Hurting Will was the last thing Mike would ever want to do. But seeing his two other friends react similarly and Will not hold it against them made him feel relieved about his own bumbling take on it.

The real surprise of the night, at least in Mike's opinion, was Max. Granted, Mike didn't know her as well as he knew the others, but it surprised him that she seemed to act like she already knew, or at least had suspected it. "I have an older cousin who's like you," she said, sitting down beside Will with a hand on his shoulder, as she gave him a reassuring smile. "The whole family likes to pretend he doesn't exist, but I try to go visit him whenever I'm in California. He's the coolest person I know."

Will seemed relieved by her honesty, and thanked her profusely, which then led to Dustin calling for a group hug that they all (some of them reluctantly) complied with. Mike felt buoyant; it felt like their little party of four had... expanded. It felt like El and Max completed them, somehow, and he thought that was great.

Once the emotional part of the afternoon was over, they split up El's (gigantic) stack of read teen magazines between the six of them and got to work. It was a tedious couple of hours, but they were used to it by now. And hey, at least they weren't in the library now! Being in El's house meant that she could bring out her boombox and they could listen to music while they worked, which Mike really liked

because it also allowed him to learn new things about her.

Now he knew which kind of music she bopped her head to (Wang Chung), which kind she hummed under her breath distractedly (Crowded House), which kind made her stop reading so she could sing (Bon Jovi), and which kind she just had to get up and dance to, singing the chorus at the top of her lungs (The Bangles). He also learned that she didn't know all the lyrics to *La Bamba* but still tried to sing it anyway, making up words if she had to, and he thought that was the most adorable thing he'd ever seen. Every little thing he learned about her just made him like her more, and he didn't think that was going to change anytime soon.

Mike's favorite part of the evening, however, was when Chief Hopper finally came back from work nearing dinnertime, and he stood in the foyer staring at the congregation in his living room with a mixture of horror and surprise. "There are teenagers in my house," he muttered, loud enough that everybody heard it. "As in, more than two at a time."

"Sorry about that, Dad," El said, pushing herself up from where she'd been sitting on the ground to go greet her father. "We're working on that project I told you about last week. You don't mind, do you?" she gave him a side hug that didn't seem to reassure him in the slightest, but El either didn't notice or gleefully ignored it. "This is Dustin, Lucas, and Mike over there," she signaled to each of them in turn. The chief, of course, already knew Will and Max.

They each waved hi at him as El introduced them, but the chief's expression did not change. Instead, he just harrumphed and narrowed his eyes at them. "Fine, but you better order something to eat because I don't think there's enough food in this house to feed these many people," he grumbled, turning around and out of El's reach so he could hang his jacket and hat on a rack in the foyer.

"Ah, no worries, Chief," Dustin interjected with a toothy smile. "I told my mom I'd be home for dinner."

"Well, you might have to call her and tell her you'll be late," Max intervened, her eyes stuck to an issue of *Seventeen* magazine in front of her, "because I think I just found our location." She had barely

finished speaking when all five of them practically stampeded all over each other to get to where she was sitting on the love seat so they could read over her shoulder.

"Brock Sorenson arrives at the red carpet for his first ever Golden Globe Awards ceremony," Lucas read the line Max was pointing to as everybody else listened on bated breath. "*Not bad for a guy from Melba, Idaho!* he tells *Seventeen* magazine as we approach him for comment."

"Melba, Idaho, huh?" Dustin mused out loud as the five of them (literally) got off Max's back. "Which place do we know in Hawkins that is called Melba?"

"Not Melba," Will noted. "But... Melvald's!"

"That's gotta be it," Max nodded, agreeing with Will's take. Mike had to admit it sounded good to him— he couldn't think of any other place in town that could be even tangentially related to Melba, Idaho. "It's a pity that we haven't figured out the object part of the clue yet. If we could go to Melvald's tonight, we'd definitely beat Troy and Stacey to the clue, I know it."

Dustin groaned. "You think your mom would tell us what the object is if she knew?" he asked Will, nudging him lightly with his elbow.

Mike glared at him. "That's cheating," he chided him. Wasn't it just earlier that day that Dustin had been telling Troy off for doing the same thing? "We don't need to do that, we'll figure the clue out fair and square. We just have to go back to the library tomorrow. I'm sure the answers are there."

"What are you stuck on?" Everybody turned to look at the chief when he spoke. He'd just come back from, it seemed, the kitchen, since he was holding a plate with a sandwich on it. He took a bite out of the sandwich as everybody stared at him. Perhaps the food had reduced his sullenness from earlier, because he wasn't glaring at them anymore. Or maybe it was just the knowledge that they would be leaving soon and he wouldn't have to feed them.

El sighed, frustrated. "We're supposed to figure out which sport has

the largest field in terms of area," she let him know, crossing her arms and slumping back on the chair she was now sitting one. "We thought it was a football field, but now we think that's probably too easy."

"Mm," Hopper made sure to swallow the food in his mouth before he spoke. "How 'bout a golf course?" he suggested. "Those things are huge," he shook his head before lifting the half-eaten sandwich to his lips again.

Lucas shook his head. "No, it's gotta be a team sport," he clarified, since El hadn't mentioned that part.

"Huh," Hopper mumbled, still chewing this latest bite. "Well," he said once he swallowed it down, "I don't know which one it is for sure, but it's definitely not football." At that moment Mike wondered if Hopper had played sports in high school, himself. Not that he was in sports-playing shape or anything, but then again, neither was Mike's dad—and yet he talked about his golden days of varsity football all the time. Hopper seemed like the type, somehow. Maybe not football, but something else. "I mean, some sports are played on horses, after all," the older man added, taking another bite of his food.

Something about that last comment just seemed to click on everyone's minds at the exact same time. Heads snapping faster than one could blink, the six of them looked at each other with wide eyes and exclaimed "Polo!" in such uncanny unison that even Hopper was surprised, if the amused expression on his face as he chewed was any indication.

"Dad, you're a genius!" El actually got up from her seat to go hug him, although he didn't react with much more than a choked "oof!" when she slammed into his side.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, rolling his eyes but throwing an arm around his daughter and squeezing her a little nonetheless. "Does that mean you twerps are done now? 'Cause there's a postseason game I'm supposed to be watching right now so I'd really appreciate it if you'd all just go home already."

"What? You don't think we should have a celebratory sleepover? All

six of us?" El teased him cheekily, prompting her dad to ruffle her hair, which she immediately tried to dodge with a squeal. Mike couldn't help but smile at their antics, marveling at how relaxed and fun their relationship seemed to be.

"Funny," he mock-glared at her but then shook his head, amused. "All right," he started, raising his voice above the murmur of their voices. "Start packing all of this up," he said, signaling to the mess of teen magazines strewn all over his living room. "If you kids aren't outta here in ten, I'm throwing you all in lockup," he warned them, narrowing his eyes at them, but they all knew he was just joking around.

They all laughed, but they were out of the house in seven, either way.

.
. .
.

"The playing field is 300 by 160 yards (270 by 150 m)," Dustin read off the sports encyclopedia he'd pulled off the shelves as the others crowded around him, listening attentively, "the area of approximately six soccer fields or 9 football fields (10 acres)."

They'd been pretty sure after last night that polo was the answer to the first half of the clue, but they wanted to check with the literature in any case, so they could be absolutely certain. Therefore, not wanting to waste any more time, and much against Dustin's loud protestations that he needed sustenance, they decided to spend their lunch hour in the school's library—which had a more limited selection than the Hawkins Public Library, but should be more than enough for their needs, at least for that day.

It didn't take them that long, as the third book they pulled out gave them the correct dimensions, but as important as that was, it still wasn't *quite* the answer they were looking for. "That's helpful, but how do we know it's the largest one out of all the team sports?" Lucas asked, zeroing in on the problem as he was usually the first one to

do.

"One sec," Dustin retorted, lifting his index finger in the air in a universal "wait a moment" gesture. He put the heavy tome down on the table in front of him, flipped to the front of the book, and started carefully browsing through the index. So carefully, actually, that El could practically *hear* Max's patience ticking down with every second they waited in silence.

"Well?" she asked, trying to prompt Dustin into actually doing something.

"Got it," he finally said in response, flipping the pages back to almost the end of the book. He looked for the correct page for a few more seconds before landing on one that was completely filled with one large table full of numbers.

"This is a table of sports pitches by area," he read the header at the top of the page. He ran down the leftmost column with his finger, stopping in the row that said "Polo." As far as they could see, every other sport listed above polo was either not a team sport, or did not require specific dimensions for their playing field. "Think this is confirmation enough?"

"That's it," Lucas said breathlessly, leaning forward until his face was hovering over the page. "Guys, we got it." There was silence among them for one hanging, thunderstruck heartbeat, until everyone broke out into giddy squeals and cheers.

They were promptly shushed by the librarian— who, granted, was nicer than Marissa at the public library, but still pretty strict when it came to making loud noises in a place of study— and so when Mike spoke, it was in a hushed whisper. "So we have to find something related to polo at Melvald's," he summarized quickly. "We go straight after school."

As soon as the final bell rang that day, they piled into Lucas's pickup truck (it was the largest vehicle to be found among the group so they wouldn't have to be hopelessly squished for the entirety of the 10-minute trip downtown) and drove over to Melvald's, pouring through the doors two at a time with little more than a "Hi, Mom! Bye, Mom!"

from Will to Joyce, who was, as expected, manning the register.

"Hey, now— don't run in the store!" she called out, mostly to their backs as they were already splitting up to search in the different aisles. "You might run someone over!" She shook her head, looking amused. Her warning went unheeded, as there was no one else in the place.

El was looking around in the chips and soda aisle and wondering how the hell chips and soda could possibly be related to polo in any way when she thought she heard Dustin call out "Guys!" like he'd found something. It came from far away, and for a second she thought she'd imagined it, but a minute later it came again, loud enough this time that Dustin's voice broke on the last syllable. "Guys! Over here!"

She rushed out of the aisle she was in so quickly that her flats slipped on the sticky floor and she almost faceplanted right there, but she was able to make it to the farthest aisle all the way on the back wall of the store just as the others ran in. "What is it?" she asked, out of breath, but even before she formulated the question, Dustin was already pointing at something in front of him with something akin to awe.

The object in question was a photo frame: very simple, black, sober, single-photo and about letter-paper size. There was nothing exceptional about it, nothing that stood out, except for the fact that the stock photo they were using to sell the frame was a black-and-white still picture of a group of men on horseback... playing polo.

"This is it." Will grabbed the frame and ran out of the aisle, yelling "Mom! Mom!" as he made his way to the register, the others close at his heels.

"Did you find what you were looking for, guys?" Joyce asked them with a smile, but it was an almost mischievous one— El could tell she knew something. "Would you like me to ring that up for you?" she offered, signaling to the frame Will held in his hands.

"No, we just need to take a photo with it," Will mumbled dismissively in reply. "This is for the contest— Mom, are we the first ones who've picked out this frame over the past few days?"

Joyce was still smiling like the cat that ate the canary from the opposite side of the till. "Well, someone else might've enquired about that frame during the periods I wasn't working," she started in a mock serious tone, obviously trying to stretch out the intrigue that had them all leaning forward on the balls of their feet. "But as far as I can tell... yes, you're the first!" she exclaimed with a big grin, prompting another round of cheers and high fives from the six of them.

They had to pull the first person who happened to be walking by into the store, but once someone did— a clueless-looking nineteen-year-old who worked in the laundromat next door and was just headed down the street after his shift was over when he was bowled over by a group of rambunctious high school juniors— they pulled Joyce with them into the picture and gave the camera their biggest, brightest smiles as they posed with the frame front and center.

Somehow in the scuffle, El ended up on the far end of the group, standing right beside Mike as they had to squish closer so that all of them could fit in the photo. He was standing so close to her and she just couldn't help herself: she touched the back of her hand to his where it was hanging right between them, and was delighted when he responded by grabbing hers, wrapping it warmly within his hold.

She wanted to look up at him, but their attention was demanded by their impromptu photographer. "Okay, everybody look here," he said, pointing to the camera with one hand. Heart beating faster than normal, El found herself resting her head against Mike's shoulder as their fingers intertwined tightly. Nobody else seemed to notice, and the older teenager got ready to take the picture. "Three... two... one!" The flash went off.

She didn't notice at the moment, but when the Polaroid was developed, she saw that Mike had been captured looking down at her with a soft smile on his face. She was sure she was going to get another round of teasing from her friends for it, but she thought it was worth it.

It was absolutely her favorite picture they had taken for this contest so far.

.

Notes: Troy is an asshole. Kids, don't be like Troy.

I've been meaning to write a scene where Will comes out to his friends since *forever*. This one was, of course, slightly constrained because the main focus of this story is on Mike and Eleven's relationship and everything is seen from their points of view, but I hope I did it justice. Will is my smol bean and he deserves everything good in the world.

Wang Chung is a British new wave band from the 80s; you might recognize them from their biggest hit, *Everybody Have Fun Tonight*, which came in at no. 12 in Billboard's list of Hot 100 songs of 1987. Similarly there's Crowded House, an Australian rock band whose classic *Don't Dream It's Over* came in at no. 13 that year. New Jersey's own Bon Jovi beat both of them by just a teeny bit that year, with what's arguably their most famous song ever, *Livin' on a Prayer*, coming in at number 10. But none of them could hold a candle to pop-rock LA wonders The Bangles, whose iconic *Walk like an Egyptian* came in at number one.

La Bamba was originally a Mexican folk song that was first introduced to international audiences when it was adapted by Ritchie Valens in 1958. Valens's life was the subject of a biopic in 1987, however, and for its soundtrack a cover of the track by LA rock band Los Lobos brought the song back to popularity. It came in at number 11 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart that year. The song is entirely in Spanish, hence why El doesn't know the lyrics.

Melba is a tiny city in Canyon County, Idaho, part of the Boise City-Nampa Metropolitan Area. It's home to just over 500 people, according to the latest census. The description of a polo playing field as read by Dustin was lifted directly off Wikipedia, because I am lazy and we're not in the 80s anymore so I'm allowed to use the internet, haha.

Up next week: Chemistry. Considering that was my favorite subject in school and I feel obligated to pay my respects, you might find the next chapter to be, uh, *cough* *interesting*. And that's all I'm going to

say about that for now. ;)

5. Clue 4: Chemistry

Searching For Your Heart, Clue #4: Chemistry. PG-13, romance/fluff/friendship, no-powers AU, Mike/Eleven.

One of the world's biggest action movie superstars is coming to town, and every kid in Hawkins High is determined to win MTV's back-to-school scavenger hunt and get a face-to-face meeting with their idol. Mike and his friends are sure they've got this in the bag— until the contest throws a wrench in their plans and their only shot at winning is partnering up with Mike's longtime crush, El Hopper.

Note: The clues for the Scavenger Hunt are actual clues (well, except for the ones relating to Brock Sorenson because those are obviously just made up). You might get a kick out of them if you're into trivia or that kind of stuff— be sure to let me know in a comment if you solve them before the kids do here!

Note 2: This is a high-school AU where Eleven doesn't have her powers, but it still takes place in the 80s because the internet would make it way too easy, lol. xD

.

.

Matches

Antiseptic

Inorganic fungicide

Electrolytic capacitor

Diamond

Acid

Starch test

Hyperbaric chambers

"It reads almost like a recipe," Dustin commented as he read the words off the flyer he had lying on the table in front of him. It was the weekend, so they had all convened to Mike's basement once more in order to work on the fourth clue. "Or a grocery shopping list."

"Yeah, except you can't walk into a Walmart and put a hyperbaric chamber in your cart," Will quipped amusedly from the couch, where he was reading up on antiseptic substances. They'd been at it for a few hours, but this time the entire ambiance was much more relaxed than it had been the last time they'd taken over the Wheelers' basement, mainly because they already had the answer to the location part of the clue, and they were feeling pretty good about it.

When they'd picked up the latest clue flyer on Friday, they had meant to get a start on it right away. They thought they'd have to do a lot of work to get the right answers, so they were surprised when Max took one look at the location question— *What was Brock Sorenson's first job?*— and snorted. "Yeah, I definitely know that one," she said, handing the flyer off to El, almost with disinterest.

El took a couple of seconds to read it herself, before lifting her eyes from the paper toward her redheaded friend. "Ice cream parlor, right?" she asked. She wasn't 100% sure, but she thought she had read that fact somewhere at least once.

"Yep," Max confirmed, sounding almost bored as she popped the P sound, while all the boys just stared at them in utter shock. That easy? Yes, that's how easy it was for them to figure out that they would find their fourth clue at Scoops Ahoy.

But they couldn't very well go in there and order one of everything on the menu (despite Dustin insisting that he took that idea as a challenge), so they had to figure out the "object" side of the clue before they could even step foot in the Starcourt Mall.

They had looked at the list in several different ways. Initially, they had thought they needed to figure out what those objects on the list had in common, which quickly proved fruitless. Following their experience with the first clue, they had tried rearranging the list in alphabetical order to see if any patterns emerged. No luck there, either. They went as far as to try and rearrange the letters on each item to see if there were any hidden clues, without any success other than now they knew that if you rearranged the letters in antiseptic it spelled out tacit penis, which had them all rolling around on the floor in laughter for about fifteen straight minutes. (*Boys*, El couldn't help but think, conveniently ignoring the fact that Max's laughter had

been the loudest.)

"We're going about this all wrong," it had been Mike who first uttered what was quickly becoming their new party motto. "The flyer says this is supposed to be about chemistry, right? So what does chemistry have to do with these objects?"

"The same thing it has to do with all objects," El had been quick to point out as she opened her chemistry textbook on her lap. They had quickly established that she and Mike were the best out of the group at chemistry, so the others were quite okay with letting the two of them take point on this one. "Chemistry is the study of the composition, structure, properties, behavior, and changes undergone by compounds composed of elemental atoms and the molecules generated when these atoms combine," she read off the introduction section of her textbook.

"Exactly," Mike had given her an enthusiastic nod, and her cheeks had flushed with pride. "It's got to be about what these things are *made* of. So, which elements are all these things made out of?" he posed the question to the entire group.

"Well," El had then switched out her chemistry textbook with her notebook where she'd written down the list they were given in the flyer, one on each line, "diamonds are basically pure carbon," she pointed out. When Mike nodded and gave her a thumbs up, she had written down "— Carbon" right beside the word "Diamond" on her notebook.

"And the starch test," Will had called out, "we did that in our Chemistry class, didn't we?" El nodded; she and Will had been in the same Chemistry class last year and they'd done a bunch of experiments in the lab— one of which was testing potatoes and other vegetables for starch. "The substance we used to test for starch was... iodine, wasn't it?" El nodded again, diligently writing "— Iodine" right beside "Starch test" on her notebook.

The boys had then immediately launched into a discussion of the different materials electrolytic capacitors were made of, quickly coming to the conclusion that the element they were looking for must be tantalum— which surprised El because they seemed so

knowledgeable about the topic even while El had no idea what an electrolytic capacitor even *was*. But they seemed sure of it, so she wrote down "— Tantalum" down in her notebook as they suggested.

"What about the acid, though?" Mike had then wondered aloud. "There are many different kinds of acids. Sulphuric acid, citric acid, acetic acid... how are we supposed to know which kind of acid they want us to use for this?"

Lucas had shaken his head. "Wait. There's one thing all acids have in common," he had noted, pointing to Mike with his index finger.

Mike's eyes had widened. "Hydrogen!" he and Lucas had exclaimed at the same time, and El hurried to write "— Hydrogen" right beside "Acid" on her list. That was four out of eight. She looked around at the others just as Mike asked, "Anyone else got any ideas?"

There was silence for a moment as everyone thought of the other things on the list and what elements they could possibly represent, but pretty much everyone was drawing a blank. "Matches, I think..." Dustin had started, hesitant. "I think they can be made out of different things. Wood, obviously, but that would be carbon again..."

"Who's to say we can't have the same element twice?" Lucas had pointed out. It was a premise El hadn't thought about up until that point, but now that Lucas mentioned it, it made a lot of sense. They didn't know what kind of pattern would emerge from this list of elements, so they couldn't know what the rules were. Maybe they *did* need to list carbon twice.

Mike had disagreed with that premise. "If they wanted us to think of wood, they would've listed furniture. Or, I don't know, trees or something," he had noted smartly just as El had been about to write a second "Carbon" down in her notebook. "But they went with matches. So, clearly, it has to be about what matches *do*: generate fire. So what element does a match have that generates fire?"

"As I was saying before," Dustin had pointedly re-introduced himself into the conversation, "there can be different types of matches, and each of them generates fire from a different chemical reaction. I think there's a type that's more common than others— the most

commercially available one that everybody has in their house, I mean — but I don't remember exactly what it's made out of." He then sighed. "I remember reading about it at some point, but it's not coming to mind right now."

"So we need to go back to the books," Lucas had declared, and that was when they decided to split up the work between the six of them, and start reading through the latest books Dustin had borrowed from the library for any information about the four items they had left.

"Hey." El looked up from the book she'd been reading on fungi to look at Max, who had just prodded her thigh with her foot from the couch. El's eyes were bleary from reading so much— she really ought to take a break or she was going to have nightmares about killer fungi that night.

"You wanna go shopping for Homecoming after this?" Max was supposed to be reading up on hyperbaric chambers, but she'd clearly given up on it after a while, throwing her long hair over her shoulder so she could braid it over and over again as a means to entertain herself.

"Sure, I guess," El replied. They'd agreed earlier that day that they wouldn't pull an all-nighter on this— Dustin's mom was starting to get upset about how little time he'd been spending at home lately, plus they only had so many books to search through due to the lending limitations at the library— so they would most likely be done with this session sometime before dinner. Homecoming was coming up the following weekend. Max was probably just going to wear jeans and a blouse as she often did with these dances, but she didn't mind helping El pick out a dress for the occasion; it had become a sort of tradition between the two of them that they would go to the mall together and browse through their selection while complaining about how expensive everything was. "Will, you wanna come with?"

She saw her friend hesitate. She knew Will was still nervous about telling his mom about his big secret, which is why he'd jumped at any chance to go out with his friends over the past few days, even when it didn't involve working on the scavenger hunt. Still, this time he didn't seem so eager. "I don't know," he mumbled. "I don't think I'm going to Homecoming."

That alarmed everyone. "What?" Dustin exclaimed, appalled. "You can't not go to Homecoming. That's where they're going to announce the winning team! What if we win and you're not there? You have to go!" he urged his friend, insistent.

Will sighed. "And what am I going to do there, Dustin? Dance with girls?" They all had to admit they understood how hard school dances were going to be for Will from that point on. Even if no one else knew the truth about him, he wasn't going to just pretend he wasn't gay—he'd made it very clear that he couldn't bring himself to do that anymore. So being at a function where everybody was expected to find a (heterosexual) date and dance with them was bound to be difficult for him. They all knew that.

"You don't have to dance if you don't want to. You can just hang out with us at the table," Mike suggested helpfully.

Will shook his head. "But I don't want to make you guys feel obligated to stay on the sidelines with me if you'd rather spend time with your dates and all. Don't do that just for me," he urged them, clearly very distressed about it.

El saw Max and Lucas exchange a glance. She didn't know what their plans were for Homecoming—whether they'd come to some kind of agreement of where their relationship was going, if it was going anywhere—but obviously there had been *some* kind of understanding there. Not anymore, though. "I wasn't planning on bringing a date," Lucas said, trying to reassure Will. "I figure it'd be awkward if we win, wouldn't it? The six of us would have to go deal with that and then we'd end up ditching our dates anyway. Doesn't seem worth it," he finished with a shrug. El was pretty sure that wasn't the real reason he wasn't bringing a date, but hey, it made sense, too.

"I'm with Lucas," Max intervened, closing the book she was supposed to be reading with a *plop*. "I think we should all just go stag. Makes things easier, don't you think?"

"I think it's great that you all seem so certain that I could get a date in a week," Dustin quipped with a chuckle from the opposite side of the room. "Man... I was kinda thinking of asking Jennifer Hayes, but I guess now I can't," he mumbled, sounding a little disappointed.

"D'you think she would've said yes?"

His question was met with scoffs, snorts, and "nopes" from most every one of his friends, except for El, who gave him a warm smile. "I'm sure Jen would've been lucky to get to go to Homecoming with you, Dustin," she assured her new friend, because she felt someone had to.

"Thank you, El! See, this is why you're my favorite." Dustin gave her a bright, toothy grin, and stood up to cross the room and give her a bear hug so enthusiastic that it lifted her off the ground for a few seconds.

"Dustin! Stop!" she squealed when he tried to spin her around, laughing gleefully all the way. When he finally put her feet back down on the ground, breathing hard from laughing so much, she looked over his shoulder to see Mike looking at them with a soft smile on his face. El couldn't help but blush as her gaze met his. She'd been hoping he would ask her to Homecoming— or maybe she would ask him, she hadn't entirely made up her mind about that yet— but now she guessed that wouldn't be possible.

"So it's decided, then," Mike declared, throwing an arm around Will's shoulders in support. He was still smiling, and El had to tell herself she was just imagining an undertone of disappointment in his words. "We go to Homecoming as a group."

The others cheered, and Will gave them all a tremulous smile. "Thanks, guys," he told them sincerely.

Max threw an arm around his shoulders from the opposite side as Mike. "Now you definitely have to come with us to the mall," she said, reminding Will how this entire conversation had started. Will nodded, relenting now that he had no excuse to avoid the topic of Homecoming.

"Hey, if you're all getting out of here together, can you give me a ride home, Max?" Dustin implored, and past that point, it was pretty obvious their research was done for the day. They each picked up the books they'd been handed and resolved to keep working on their own through the night, hoping it wouldn't take too long to be done with this particular clue.

.

.

.

They met up at Benny's the next day for lunch, each carrying their assigned reading along with some other books Lucas and Mike had picked out from the library on the way to the diner.

Through the night, Dustin had figured out that most commercial matches generated fire through a reaction between red phosphorus and an oxidizer, usually a perchlorate, but that could vary; they figured the phosphorus was the one consistent part of the chemical equation, so that's what they decided to go with.

Max had sussed out that hyperbaric chambers were large tubes where patients were placed so they could be subjected to an inflow of oxygen at higher pressures than regular atmospheric pressure. Apparently this helped people deal with decompression illness and even carbon monoxide poisoning. It was pretty clear the main element involved with hyperbaric chambers was oxygen, so they quickly wrote that one down on their elements list.

El, for her part, had read up on fungicides and had determined that there were many different types of commercially available fungicides, most of them toxic to the point that it almost made her want to swear off plant-based food for the rest of her life (Mike saw her wrinkle her nose as she suspiciously eyed the lettuce on her burger, and almost laughed). Among inorganic fungicides, however, the most common ingredient (and a large part of what made them toxic to begin with) was sulfur. Seemed pretty straightforward that said element made its way into their list among the other items.

The only item on the list they were still unsure of was the antiseptic. While there were many different types of antiseptics, such as alcohol or hydrogen peroxide, Will was pretty sure the one they were looking for was straight-up Iodine— they'd all had the experience of someone, usually their parents or the school nurse, cleaning up their scrapes with iodine at one point or another in their lives. The problem was, if antiseptic led them to iodine, that would be the

second time iodine came up on their list, and they still weren't sure if repeating an element was even allowed.

"But even without taking the double iodine into account," Lucas started, pulling El's notebook where she had the full list written down toward himself, "what object can we even think of that is made out of phosphorus, iodine, sulfur, tantalum, carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen?" He shook his head. "It sounds like some crazy mixture that couldn't possibly exist in anything."

"Could it be some kind of explosive, maybe? A fuel of some kind?" Dustin suggested, looking over Lucas's shoulder to read the list as well. "Like black powder is made out of sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter."

"And where, exactly, would we find an explosive or fuel at Scoops Ahoy?" Max retorted smartly, leading Dustin to groan in frustration.

"Plus, tantalum is super rare." Mike had been doing some reading of his own last night, specifically on the metal that seemed like the odd element out on the list. "It's mainly used for capacitors, but also in alloys for engine parts, nuclear reactors, tanks, and stuff like that. If it's ever used in conjunction with all these other elements, it's gotta be something really specific that we'll probably never find anywhere in Hawkins."

Most of his friends huffed in disappointment, but El, who had remained pensive through their entire discussion, pulled her notebook back in front of her. "Wait, guys," she said, as if she'd just had a realization, and they had all been so quiet after Mike's last assertion that even in a quiet tone she immediately grabbed everyone's attention. "What if it's not what these elements *make*, but what they *spell*?"

Mike and the others couldn't quite follow what she meant, but she didn't let that stop her as she pulled her chemistry textbook out of her book bag and opened it up to one of the last pages in the back, the one that was completely covered by a well-known diagram: the periodic table. Grabbing her pencil, she started writing:

Phosphorus — P

Iodine — I
Sulfur — S
Tantalum — Ta
Carbon — C
Hydrogen — H
Iodine — I
Oxygen — O

"P, i, s, t, a, c, h, i, and o," Mike read over her shoulder. "Pistachio," he added, his voice taking on an astonished intonation as he realized this was it. They had their answer.

"We have to get pistachio ice cream at Scoops Ahoy!" Max exclaimed once it clicked with her, too. She was so excited that she stood up on the bench, hands extended toward the ceiling in victory. "Woo-hoo!" The others immediately joined in on the cheering, banging their hands on the table so hard that it sounded like rumbling thunder. Dustin's hat flew off his head and landed in some other table, and everybody in the diner was staring at them in curious inquiry, but they couldn't care less.

They'd solved their fourth clue. They were so close to winning, they could almost taste it.

As his friends cheered and danced around them, Mike turned to look at El, who was laughing so hard that tears had formed in her eyes. Her grin was wide, her laughter tinkling like bells, and every time she leaned forward, her soft neck and the slope of her delicate jaw was bared to his gaze invitingly. She looked so joyous, so vibrant, that he couldn't keep himself from leaning in and whispering in her ear: "That was brilliant."

She startled for a second, not expecting the sound, the tickle of his breath so near her skin, but then she turned to look at him, her beautiful honey-brown eyes wide in flattered surprise. Then she nudged his arm with her shoulder and gave him a radiant, knowing smile, and he knew she was, just like he intended, remembering that first real conversation they had in his car on the way to her house just a little over two weeks ago.

Had it been that short a time? It felt like he'd been inching closer and

closer to her at a glacial pace, and every cell in his body was screaming at him to take a chance, to shake off his fears and make a move, and as she held his gaze enthrallingly— like the entire diner and their whole group of loud, noisy friends had disappeared and it was just the two of them staring into each other's eyes— he decided that he was going to do it. He was going to tell her how he felt. He had to.

Today.

.
. .

They drove to the mall in record time and rushed to the food court in such a mad dash that they nearly bowled over a bunch of people. When they got to Scoops Ahoy and there was a line, and they started getting so impatient that Robin— Steve's girlfriend who now worked as the manager in the ice cream parlor— had to tell them to settle down and stop harassing her customers or she was going to ban them for life.

While her friends got to the end of the line and ordered a large bowl of pistachio ice cream, El stayed to the side and looked over the menu, figuring she would just be in the way and not wanting to disrupt Scoops Ahoy's clientele any more than they already had. She was browsing through their list of milkshake flavors when she felt someone move to stand close to her, and she looked down from the menu to see that it was Mike. Immediately the butterflies began fluttering in her tummy, as they always did when she was around him.

"Not a fan of pistachio?" he asked with a smile.

El couldn't help but crinkle her nose. She had a large sweet tooth and would usually eat anything so long as it was sweet, but there was something about pistachios that she simply could not enjoy. She didn't really know what it was; her dad thought it might be the green color, but she had no problems with mint or other green ice creams,

and she liked nuts in general, so it couldn't be that aspect of it as well. She just knew she would prefer anything else but pistachio. That's why, when they arrived, her eyes had immediately been drawn to the menu, as if looking for other options. "Yeah... I don't really like it much," she admitted with a shrug, a little amused that she was so transparent.

"Do you want to get something else? I mean, we only need the pistachio for the scavenger hunt picture, it's not like you actually need to eat it if you don't want to," he explained, babbling a little in a way she found absolutely adorable. "We could, uh," his cheeks went a little red, "we could share a sundae or something. Um, if you want," he finally managed, somewhat awkwardly, and she had to bite her lip so as not to let out a giggle.

Before she could tell him that yes, she would love to share a sundae with him (eeeeeee!), however, their friends made their appearance with a glass bowl filled with four scoops of pistachio ice cream and urged them to find a table. "Come on," Lucas motioned them toward the seating area of the food court. "Robin said she'll take our picture."

After finding a place and arranging themselves around the ice cream bowl— plus the two solid minutes Dustin took to make sure the Scoops Ahoy logo on the bowl was perfectly centered and visible—they proceeded to take the picture, but it wasn't until they finally had it in their hands, Polaroid clearly developed and ready to be submitted to the school's Guidance Counselor the next day, that they felt relaxed enough to finally dive into the pistachio ice cream, which was half melted by that point.

"Hey, so, El and I are going to go get a sundae," Mike said as the two of them remained standing beside the table while their friends took their seats around the bowl of ice cream and started to dig in. He took a second to look at her and make sure she was up for that, since she hadn't answered before, and she nodded. "She doesn't like pistachio, so we figured we could get something she does like." At his words, however, his friends' movements stalled, and they turned their heads away from their refreshing dessert to look at the two of them, all eight eyebrows raised high in a way that El was trying really hard to pretend wasn't suggestive.

They didn't say anything, just stared. Mike and El did the same until Mike finally grew uncomfortable enough that he muttered "Yeah, okay, we're going," and spun on his heel, tugging at her arm to signal that he wanted her to come with him.

They were silent for the first minute or two, trying to shake off the remaining awkwardness of what their friends must obviously be thinking. El knew she was flushed; she hated that she and Mike were so easy to tease even without having to say anything, and not for the first time she wondered if it was worth it to maybe try and act on her feelings for him if they were going to face nothing but teasing from everyone.

But then Mike turned to her with a hopeful smile and asked about which ice cream flavor she would prefer, and she felt herself relax. She could take some light teasing from her friends as long as Mike was standing beside her, smiling down at her that way. "Strawberry," she said after giving it some thought. "That's my favorite."

Mike's eyes glimmered as he nodded. "That's good to know," he declared as if saving this little piece of information in the back of his mind for posterity. The prospect that he wanted to learn more about her likes and dislikes made her heart beat just a tiny bit faster.

Mike ordered a medium strawberry sundae and paid for it— El wanted to pay for her half but he insisted she could get the check the next time. He said it almost offhandedly but it made El blush, just the thought that there would be a next time when she and Mike shared ice cream like this. Maybe "next time" they could do it without their friends being around. That'd be cool.

Once they got their sundae they walked back to their table. Because their friends were splitting one big bowl of ice cream between four people, they were almost done with it by the time Mike and El sat down on the empty side of the table. "That looks good," Max commented, looking over at their sundae as she took one last lick of her empty spoon. As she put the spoon down inside the bowl along with the other three, though, she let out a (too dramatic to be believable) gasp. "Oh no! Look at the time! I told my mom I'd be home by dinner," she said quickly, pushing herself to her feet.

It was El's turn to look at her friend with a raised eyebrow. "It's four pm."

"Yeah, well, you know how she gets if I'm late. Better not push it," Max sidestepped her concerns with a wave of her hand, like what she was saying made complete sense when it was clear to El that she was just trying to find the first excuse she could think of to leave. "Anyone coming with me?" she asked the boys. Half of them had driven over to the mall with Max and half of them with Mike, so she could leave in her car without leaving anyone stranded.

None of the boys answered for a moment, until Max none-too-subtly kicked Lucas in the shin. "Ow! Actually, yeah, I'll come with if you can make a pit stop at the library," he finally said, shaking himself out of his momentary stupor. "I gotta return the books I took out for the chemistry clue."

"You just borrowed them this morning," Mike pointed out in a dry tone, pointing at Lucas with his empty spoon.

"Well, we might need to borrow more for the last clue, so I might as well return this batch," Lucas retorted as he stood up as well. He slapped Dustin's shoulder to get his curly-haired friend's attention. "You coming with?"

"Yeah, I should probably stop by the library, too." Dustin wasn't even pretending that he wasn't grinning at Mike and El like the cat that ate the canary. "I haven't been there since Friday. I'm sure Marissa's starting to miss me."

"Eww. She's like forty, dude," Max commented with a grimace, which made everyone laugh even though Dustin had clearly not meant it that way. El decided not to bring up Brock Sorenson this time around. "Come on, we better get going," she reminded him, pulling him up to his feet by one arm. Dustin let himself be pulled along with a quick wave goodbye.

Will watched the three of them go for a second before turning to Mike and El. "I'm gonna go with them," he decided, pushing his arms down on the table to make himself stand up. Once he was up, he gave them a somewhat amused smile. "Enjoy your ice cream," he

declared before turning to follow their other three friends on the way out of the food court.

El shook her head as she watched him go. "Did you find that whole thing..." She signaled in their friends' general direction with her spoon. "...Weird?" It was only after she spoke the word that she dipped her spoon into the pink sundae and took her first bite.

Mike was still looking toward the entrance to the food court when she did. "Yeah, our friends are ridiculous," he said, rolling his eyes before turning to face her and taking his own first bite of the sundae. "Mm! Hey, this is actually pretty good."

"You didn't think you were going to like it?" El asked curiously as she took another spoonful. If he didn't like strawberry, he should've said something earlier. She wouldn't have minded picking some other flavor instead.

"No, it's not that," he said quickly, his eyes widening slightly as if he hadn't realized the implications of his comment. "I do like strawberry, it's just not my favorite flavor."

"So, what is your favorite flavor, then?" she asked in a follow-up, scooping up another spoonful of ice cream and making sure she also got some of the bright-red strawberry syrup and the peanuts on top. "You already know mine, so it's only fair."

He didn't reply immediately but rather took his time, taking another spoonful of ice cream and bringing it up to his mouth while avoiding her inquisitive gaze. He seemed to be thinking of whether or not he wanted to answer that question, for some reason, but at the same time his lips were pressed together tightly, like he was trying to hold back a grin. Finally, after savoring that latest bite for a few more silent seconds, he sighed. "Okay, fine," he huffed out with a shake of his head. "It's vanilla. Okay? I prefer vanilla."

Something about the resignation in his posture made El burst out in laughter, and Mike mock grumpily signaled in her direction as if allowing her the opportunity to get all the amusement out. "Go ahead, tell me I'm boring," he tried to say seriously, like he'd been through a moment like this with someone else before, but in the end

he couldn't quite keep up the serious facade and he chuckled, crossing his arms with a smile.

"I don't think you're boring," El assured him once her laughter died down enough for her to catch her breath. "I actually think it's kinda brave of you. Not many people would admit to preferring such a basic flavor these days."

Mike's eyebrows lifted high on his forehead, so that they got lost under his fringe. "Oh, so I'm not boring but I'm basic," he retorted, breaking out into laughter himself. "Thanks, that makes me feel a *lot* better," he added with a snort, which made El giggle. He shook his head. "Seriously, everybody gives me grief for it," he further explained, "but I just like that I can put anything on vanilla and have it taste good, you know what I mean?"

"There you go, you like variety in your own way," she pointed out magnanimously before taking one look at his dubious expression and breaking out into a whole new round of snickers. She loved this. She loved it here with him— they were just talking about ice cream, the most unassuming of conversation topics ever, and she already felt that she had laughed more than she had in ages. Being around Mike just made her feel happy, and she just couldn't hold that feeling in. "Next time we'll order vanilla and you'll have your chance to convince me of what the best toppings are." She narrowed her eyes at him playfully. "Knowing your tastes, I'm guessing... whipped cream?"

He sniffed, mock offended. "You'll have to keep guessing," he declared, and she wouldn't mind going down a whole list of anything even remotely resembling ice cream toppings, so long as she got to go down the list with him. He shook his head again and smiled, putting his spoon down on the table. "You can have the rest if you want," he offered, although there wasn't much of the pink now-liquid leftover at the bottom of the cup.

"Thank you!" she replied with a grin, pulling the cup toward her with an enthusiasm that made Mike snicker. She was never one to turn down extra sweets.

She dug into the leftover melted ice cream with gusto, but the closer she got to the bottom of the cup, the more she started to realize that

her time with Mike that afternoon was coming to a close. She didn't want to go. She wanted to stay with him a little longer.

Her disappointment must've shown on her face, because he asked, "Everything okay?" He chuckled. "You look a bit like my little sister Holly does when she finishes her dessert too fast."

The mental image was adorable, but not really enough to get El out of her funk. "Yeah, I'm fine," she said, not entirely convincingly to her own ears, dropping her spoon inside the now empty cup and pushing the cup toward the middle of the table again. "I'm just— I'm done," she signaled to the empty cup with one hand. "Guess we should start heading back now, huh?"

His expression, which up to a second ago had been mostly amused and maybe just a teeny bit concerned, fell. "Oh," he said, as if the fact that they had no real reason to stay any longer hadn't even crossed his mind. "Well, we don't *have* to go... if you don't want to," he pointed out, and El's heart skipped a beat in the hope that maybe he was as reluctant to end their impromptu hangout as she was. "I mean, it's still pretty early. Maybe we could... take a walk?" he suggested, a little hesitant.

He was looking at her with such hope in his eyes that she couldn't help but squeal internally. He really *did* want to spend more time with her, just the two of them. She hoped that meant that he really did like her, but either way, she wasn't going to pass up the opportunity. "I'd like that," she said, grinning uncontrollably. He grinned right back at her.

.
. .

There were no parks near Starcourt Mall, so they had to make do with the next best thing (?), which turned out to be a minigolf course off the back entrance of the building.

"Thanks for suggesting this," El told him as they walked past hole 1,

where the artificial green twisted on itself in a closed curve that veered under a small wooden bridge, something that was sure to frustrate the three eight-year-olds that were currently attempting to play in it. "I love the mall as much as the next person, but I can only spend so many hours inside that building in one weekend."

"Ah, that's right," Mike remembered, "you guys were here yesterday. Did you find everything you came to find?"

"Mostly," she said with a shrug. They were walking close to each other because the walkway was narrow between the minigolf holes, and every once in a while the back of her hand touched his. He kept thinking he should just take her hand; they'd held hands before— just once for barely a minute while they took a photo at Melvald's a few days ago, but they *had* and that should make it not a big deal anymore, right? But trying to pluck up the courage was a different thing altogether. "I kinda want to see if I can find a new pair of shoes to go with my dress, but then I figure we're all going as a group so it's not like my outfit needs to be that fancy."

"Yeah," Mike agreed. He didn't say it, but of course he thought she would look pretty no matter what shoes she was wearing. "I mean... it's just us," he added with a shrug of his own. "There's no need to impress anyone."

She smiled at him in what he interpreted as gratitude, then chuckled. "Yes, well— dressing up is half the fun," she admitted, and it was such a *girl* thing to say that it made him chuckle, too. She looked up at him in a sideways manner. "This is a really nice thing you guys are doing for Will, by the way," she let him know. "I know he really appreciates it."

"Well, we just want him to feel comfortable," Mike said as they walked past a hole— he couldn't see the number— where the ball had to be pushed inside the open mouth of a clown and then out the other side. "I don't want him to feel like he has to pretend to be someone other than who he is just for our sake, you know? He shouldn't have to, even if that means I don't get to take a date."

She nodded, looking in front of them thoughtfully. They were both silent for a minute or so, strolling through the walkway past the

elaborate minigolf green designs, before she turned to look at him again. "You wanted to ask someone?" she asked, seemingly curious.

And that was it. That was his chance to finally tell her how he felt, wasn't it? The perfect opportunity presenting itself to him in a silver platter, if only he could scrounge up the courage to get the words out. "Yeah, actually. I, uh..." He looked down at his feet, nervous. "I was thinking of, um..." He cleared his throat. "I kinda wanted to ask... you."

He was so focused on dodging her prying gaze and putting one foot in front of the other that he didn't notice she had stopped walking until she was already a good five feet behind him. Alarmed, he stopped and turned, hoping he hadn't offended her or anything. "I mean— I—"

"Really?" she asked and, okay, she didn't *sound* upset. If anything, she looked surprised— maybe pleasantly so?— and the corners of her mouth were starting to curl up just slightly as she looked at him expectantly. Dare he say hopefully?

His own mouth started stretching into an excited grin without him really meaning for it. "Yeah," he said with a relieved snicker. "Is it that unbelievable?"

She shook her head, now smiling beautifully up at him. "No, I just... I didn't want to assume," she asserted bashfully, closing the distance between them just a little by taking a step forward. "But... I don't *mind*," she added coyly, pushing a strand of her hair behind her ear when the wind blew it in front of her eyes.

"No?" he asked, feeling like he wasn't going to be able to stop smiling for days.

"Let me put it this way..." Another step forward, and she was now close enough to stretch out a hand to grab hold of one of his. Their fingers intertwined as they looked at each other for a heartbeat. "If you had asked me, I would've said yes," she confessed with something of a giggle before starting to walk down the cobbled path again, pulling him along by the hand.

Mike couldn't believe his luck. El wanted to go to Homecoming with him! She wasn't going to, technically, because of the promise they'd made to Will to go as a group, but hey, she *wanted* to. That was enough to have his heart tap dancing inside his chest harder than ever before. "So, does that mean you're going to save me a dance?" he asked, hopeful. Not that he knew how to dance, but he could do a slow song. That'd be nice.

She giggled again— and *God*, he loved the sound of her laugh— and sidestepped the sails of a six-foot windmill on the fifth hole that extended a little too far out of the green and into the walkway. She turned to look at him and moved to the side so she could lean against one of the walls of the windmill, one hand behind her against the brickwork and the other one pulling him closer. "I'll save you two," she said, giving him a mischievous look, "if you do something for me."

"Anything," he said breathlessly, knowing with every fiber of his being that what he was saying was true. He took a step closer to her; standing less than a foot apart, he found himself lost in the honeyed depths of her eyes and never wanting to be found.

Her impish grin softened into something more vulnerable, more tender as she looked up at him, so close that their faces were just inches apart. "...Kiss me?" she asked in a small voice, so quiet that he almost thought he had imagined it, but as she gazed at him with hope shining in her eyes, he realized she had really asked. She wanted him to kiss her.

Him. Mike Wheeler. The girl he'd been dreaming about for nearly five years was asking him to kiss her, and there were no words to describe the elation that made him feel. As it was, he could barely remember to breathe, so the only thing he could do was lean forward and press his lips against hers softly, delicately, his eyes closing of their own volition as he felt her exhale dreamily against his cheek.

Her lips were soft— softer than he ever imagined in all the times in his life he'd caught a glimpse of her and been cast away in a daydream of doing exactly what he could scarcely believe he was doing right now. He had to lean down to kiss her but she was pushing up in return, kissing him back with the lightest pressure, so

carefully that it made his heart stutter and skip.

It was a delicate kiss. Dreamy and tentative and sweet, so intimate, so emotional that it made Mike shiver from the sheer perfection down to the tips of his toes. It was everything a first kiss should be, and if the tightening hold of her hand in his was any indication, she was enjoying it just as much as he was.

When they separated, he didn't open his eyes for a moment longer, leaning her forehead against hers. They were partially obscured from prying eyes by the spinning sails of the decorative windmill, and he didn't feel like moving away from her anytime soon. If he ran his tongue over his lower lip, he could still taste the flavor of strawberry ice cream that lingered from the contact with her mouth, and it made him want to lean in again so he could savor it again. Savor her again. "I've... been wanting to do that for a long time," he admitted with a sigh.

"Me too," she admitted right back with a smile before pushing herself up to her tiptoes so she could kiss him again. The gesture was shorter this time, but just as tender. "I really like you, Mike Wheeler," she added, bringing up the hand that had up until now been behind her back to play with the wool at the neckline of his sweater.

"I really like you, too," Mike replied, unable to help himself from leaning in again and stealing another peck. The feeling of her lips pressed against his was addictive. "I think I've liked you since the day that we met," he confessed a little self-consciously, but still smiling.

She let out a short, disbelieving chuckle. "We are silly, silly people," she said, shaking her head, and only explained once she saw his confused expression. "I've liked you since the day we met, too," she admitted, now her time to be a little sheepish. She laughed. "Max is never going to let me live this one down."

He had to laugh, too. "Yeah, the guys give me grief for it all the time," he let her know, shaking his head.

"Actually," she chimed in matter-of-factly, "Dustin kind of told me that you liked me, a little while ago." She cringed a little as she said the words, but in an amused way.

Mike gaped at her. "Seriously?!" he exclaimed, indignant. "I'm gonna murder him," he declared, taking a step back almost as if he intended to go look for his curly-haired soon-to-be ex-friend right then and there, but El pulled him back by the hand before he could get too far away.

"Don't," she warned him. "I'm pretty sure it was an accident. And anyway, it doesn't really matter anymore, does it?" she asked, squeezing his hand momentarily as if to remind him of what had just transpired between them. As if he could forget.

"I guess not," he mumbled a little reluctantly. He was still annoyed that Dustin had spilled his biggest secret to the object of his affections— *party rules, dammit*— but at the same time it had worked out for the best, so he couldn't complain. "But... what does this mean, then?" he asked, taking his turn to squeeze her hand to indicate what he meant by "this."

"Well," she started carefully, "we definitely can't go to Homecoming together."

"No, I know," he was quick to assure her. As much as he wanted to spend every waking moment with her and shout to the rooftops that the most beautiful girl in the world liked him, he wouldn't do that to Will. "But I was thinking maybe... after we win the scavenger hunt... and this whole thing is over..." He shrugged. "Maybe we could, uh, do something together. Just the two of us."

"Like a date?" El asked, just to clarify. She was smiling again, her eyes shining up at him.

"Yeah," he replied, that fluttery feeling coming back to the center of his chest and taking residence there for the foreseeable future. He couldn't look at her without feeling like his elation was going to vibrate right out of his skin, and it was such a warm, delicious feeling that he hoped it never faded away.

It got even better when she leaned forward and kissed him again, lingering for a breathless moment before pulling back and beaming at him. "Sounds great," she declared, then let out a joyful laugh and tugged him away from the windmill, pulling him along so they could

continue their walk down the putt-putt course.

They did a whole loop around the course, talking about everything and nothing, eventually making their way back to the back entrance of the mall. Their hands remained intertwined the entire time. It was nearing dinnertime by the time they made it back to Mike's car, so it was time to take El home, but he drove slowly, wanting to stretch out their remaining time, even though he knew he could only do so much about it.

When he parked outside her house, though, she leaned over the gear shift and kissed him goodbye, and he knew the stalling tactics were unnecessary. Yes, he had to leave her now, but he'd surely be thinking about her— and everything that happened between them today— the entire night. He'd probably dream about her that night. And he would see her again the next day at school. They still had to work on the last clue, no matter how impossible it would be for him to concentrate with her standing anywhere nearby, now that he knew for a fact what it felt like to kiss her.

He sighed and forced himself to drive away from her place, already counting the hours until the morning.

.

.

Notes: So this is where the Mileven Week "First Date" theme finally makes an appearance... or is it? ;) Different characters might have different opinions on that, just FYI.

Fun fact: It was supposed to be a slower burn than this, but I'm too impatient even when I'm the one writing the thing, so there you go. xD There's more sweetness to come and fun to be had with this story even if they've confessed their feelings, though, so I hope you all keep reading!

Walmart is a US-based multinational retail corporation that is the world's largest company by revenue and the largest US grocery retailer. The definition of chemistry El reads to the group was

paraphrased from Wikipedia because I'm too lazy to go look up one of my old chemistry textbooks. A capacitor is an electronic device that is introduced into electric circuits to store electric charge. Apart from that, I think each element of the clue was explained fairly clearly in the chapter itself, but if anyone has any questions on that, feel free to ask.

Happy Hanukkah to everybody who's celebrating this week! In next week's chapter, the party will try to figure out their final clue, and the topic of it is biology. Stay tuned to see if they get it on time!

6. Clue 5: Biology

Searching For Your Heart, Clue #5: Biology. PG-13, romance/fluff/friendship, no-powers AU, Mike/Eleven.

One of the world's biggest action movie superstars is coming to town, and every kid in Hawkins High is determined to win MTV's back-to-school scavenger hunt and get a face-to-face meeting with their idol. Mike and his friends are sure they've got this in the bag— until the contest throws a wrench in their plans and their only shot at winning is partnering up with Mike's longtime crush, El Hopper.

Note: The clues for the Scavenger Hunt are actual clues (well, except for the ones relating to Brock Sorenson because those are obviously just made up). You might get a kick out of them if you're into trivia or that kind of stuff— be sure to let me know in a comment if you solve them before the kids do here!

Note 2: This is a high-school AU where Eleven doesn't have her powers, but it still takes place in the 80s because the internet would make it way too easy, lol. xD

.

.

It wasn't like they'd been trying to keep it a secret— in all honesty, they hadn't talked about it, and it hadn't even occurred to Mike that they should— but it still annoyed him to no end that their friends seemed to take one look at them and just *know*.

Much to his disappointment, it turned out that Mike hadn't been able to see El more than in passing all day. Since the incident with Troy they had made it a point not to discuss scavenger-hunt topics in the cafeteria, and precisely because they weren't going to talk about anything urgent, El had volunteered to spend their lunch period helping the Homecoming committee with the decorations for Saturday night. Apart from lunch break, she and Mike didn't share any classes that day, so other than barely catching glances of her in the halls, he hadn't seen her, let alone talked to her until the party

met up in the Hawkins High library after school was over.

Plus, he'd stayed for a few minutes after class to ask his Physics teacher a question, so now he was the last one out of the party to make it to the group study room his friends had secured for this meeting. "Sorry I'm late," he said with a huff as he closed the door behind him, separating the murmur of their conversation from the forced silence of the rest of the library. He saw that El had saved him a seat beside her and his heart skipped a beat. "Hey," he greeted her directly as he sat down, unable to stop a bright smile from overcoming his features at the sight of her.

"Hi," she replied in a sweet whisper, her smile just a little bit shy. It hadn't even been 24 hours since the last time he spoke to her, but her voice and the way her eyes shone when they met his gaze brought back all the memories from their outing the day before in one fell swoop. He couldn't look away from her for a moment, and that's why he didn't initially catch the shit-eating grin forming on Dustin's face on the opposite side of the table.

"Oh yeah, we're good," the curly-haired teen declared, leaning back and stretching out his hand behind Will's head so that Max could high-five him.

"Worked like a charm," the redhead retorted, completing the triumphant gesture with a grin of her own. By this point both El and Mike had snapped out of their held gaze and were glaring at them for their little stunt the previous day.

"I knew you guys had done that on purpose," El muttered, shaking her head.

"For the record," Lucas intervened, sitting on the other side of El from where Mike was sitting, "I was opposed to their little machinations from the beginning," he declared, signaling to the three on the opposite side of the table.

Dustin scoffed. "Please," he said with a roll of his eyes. "You feebly protested *once* and then folded like a napkin."

"Because I wanted them to get off their asses and make a move

already," Lucas returned with a groan before leaning forward so he could see both Mike and El. "But that's done now, right? Y'all are together for good now? I hope we don't have to put up with your silly pining anymore..."

Mike glared at him, and El gasped. "We weren't pining!" she protested.

"Uh, yes, you were," Will pointed out with a sly grin, and apparently he took El's grievance as a confirmation that they were, indeed, together now, because he added, "but we're really happy for you guys," his smile turning earnest. "Oh, and if you guys want to go to Homecoming together, I totally understand—"

"No, no, don't worry about it," Mike hurried to reassure him, given everything he and El had talked about at the minigolf course yesterday.

"Yeah, we'll still go as a group," El nodded, exchanging a brief look with Mike before smiling back at Will in full support. "We kind of don't want our first date to be within view of dozens of our classmates," she added with something of a chuckle.

"Wait," Max intervened abruptly. "You mean to tell me that after all our hard work, you're not even counting the ice cream thing as a date? I am so disappointed in you two," she added with a shake of her head.

It was El's turn to roll her eyes. "Okay, one," she lifted a finger as if counting, "literally the only thing you did was leave us stranded at the mall. And two," she lifted a second finger, "we'll be the ones determining any milestones in our relationship, thank you very much."

Mike couldn't hold back a grin. Not only because he loved it when she showed more of her sassy side— one that most people wouldn't guess was there just from looking at her, but he'd been around her enough by now to know it and cherish it— but also because of her choice of words. He didn't know that one could technically call what they had a relationship since he hadn't asked her to be his girlfriend yet (though he definitely intended to do so at some point, if he

managed to get the words out anytime soon), but just the idea that she could picture a relationship between them, one that went long enough to have important *milestones* and all those couple things, made his heart start dancing in his chest.

"Alright, fine, if you want to waste the perfect opportunity we just handed you on a silver platter," Max muttered dismissively. El stuck her tongue out at her, a gesture which Max promptly returned, and as everybody laughed, Mike wondered if this was a routine the two of them engaged in often while interacting on their own. It was cute, and it underlined how close the two of them really were. "We'll move on to Biology, then," she added, signaling to Dustin to read their new and final scavenger hunt flyer.

"What is the heaviest known organism on Earth, which weighs six million kilograms and is located in south-central Utah?" Dustin read, but Mike was only half paying attention as he stretched out a hand under the table to tap the back of El's. She didn't take her eyes away from Dustin, but Mike saw her smile and felt her turn her hand upward to intertwine her fingers with his.

Oblivious to the affectionate moment happening away from view, their friends launched straight into brainstorming. "So what's the biggest animal there is, then?" Max asked, passing a few pages on the book in front of her almost arbitrarily. "Maybe a blue whale? It has to be something like that, right?"

Lucas gave her a disbelieving look. "Whales in Utah?" he asked dryly, and Mike had to admit he was right; that made very little sense, but at least Max was making suggestions.

"Guys, remember," he started, pulling the flyer from Dustin with his free hand and turning it around so he could read it. "Most of these clues have been trick questions. An attack wasn't the same thing as a battle. Numbers and elements weren't meant to be just numbers and elements. And in this one..." His eyes skimmed the paper in front of him. "...they ask for an *organism*. That means it doesn't *have* to be an animal."

"You're thinking it's a plant?" Will asked, pulling the book Max was absentmindedly browsing through in front of him, flipping back to

the index so he could look for something specific. Max just let him take the book with a shrug.

"Giant redwoods can weigh up to four million pounds," Dustin pointed out matter-of-factly, generally the most knowledgeable in the group when it came to biology and zoology. "That's nearly thirteen times the average weight of an adult blue whale."

"Okay, so it's probably a plant, then," Max commented in an *I-stand-corrected* tone.

"Giant redwoods don't grow in the Midwest, though," El pointed out smartly, sneaking a peek at whatever Will was looking for in the Biology textbook. "Where would we find anything related to them here in Hawkins?"

"Maybe it's a photo, like with the polo clue," Lucas suggested, and that was a good possibility, too. "What's the location part of the clue?"

Mike's eyes went back down to the paper in front of him. "'Where did Brock Sorenson's late father work?'" he read in a dispassionate tone. Much like with all the other location clues, he had no idea what the answer might be. He liked most of Brock's *movies*, but he'd never been particularly interested in knowing much about the man's *life*.

Everybody turned to look at Max expectantly. She shrugged. "Sorry, guys," she started, a little disappointed. "I vaguely remember he was some kind of salesman, but I don't remember exactly where he worked." She turned to look at El, who similarly shook her head.

The boys all sighed; they'd have to go back to the girly magazines, something none of them was particularly enthusiastic about. El seemed to notice. "We could split up the work if you guys want," she suggested tentatively. "Max and I can go back to my place to do the location part, and you guys work on the biology part."

Dustin let out a loud, relieved sigh. "Ahhh, bless you, El Hopper. That is the best idea I have heard in days, and I love you for it." He snuck a glance at Mike. "And I mean that in a completely platonic, friendly way, of course," he added with a snort.

Mike just looked at him with a deadpan expression. "Yeah, I got that," he retorted dryly, a little amused that his friends would think he would all of a sudden become a jealous boyfriend. They'd only admitted to liking each other the day before, for God's sake. Shaking his head, he lightly squeezed El's hand. "That sounds good. But, hey, can I call you later?" he asked, a little disappointed that after waiting the entire day to see her, she was leaving earlier than expected.

"I'd like that," she replied with an enthusiastic smile. She had to let go of him in order to start picking up her books and all the school supplies she had pulled out earlier. "Or I can call you when Max goes home?" she suggested instead as she put her notebook inside her bag.

Max threw an arm around her friend's shoulders just as El was trying to grab hold of the strap of her book bag. "Yeah, she doesn't want me to be there because she knows I'll *teeeeeease* her—" El rolled her eyes and mock-pushed her off, which made Max laugh louder than she probably should have in a library. "Alright, nerds, we'll see you tomorrow," she waved at them, making her way to the door of the study room and disappearing behind it.

"Bye, guys," El said more quietly as she finally shouldered her backpack. She looked down at Mike. "I'll call you later?" she said, a little bit more like a question and less like a statement. Then, after a moment of hesitation, she leaned forward and kissed his cheek, pulling back quickly as if she hadn't meant to do it. "Bye," she repeated, then turned to leave. Mike kept staring until the last fleck of brown from her ponytail disappeared past the doorframe.

When he turned back to look at his male friends, with what he was sure was the silliest of silly grins on his face, he found them all staring at him. Lucas's groan could probably be heard all the way to the school's main entrance. "See, this is why I was against this matchmaking thing from the beginning," he declared, signaling to Mike's goofy-ass expression as if it was Exhibit A.

Mike threw an eraser at his head that Lucas just barely managed to dodge. And then they continued reading.

The night proved somewhat productive for both groups, as the girls found that Brock's father had been a used-car salesman, while the boys had narrowed it down to a six-million-kilogram colony of trees in Utah that they weren't sure fit the question entirely, but it was the best answer they had so far.

They met up again at lunchtime to talk about it, although on Dustin's protestations that he wasn't giving up his eating time anymore, they decided to go to the alley behind the gym rather than the library. El would rather have gone to the bleachers as they had the last time, because the space was limited between two buildings, and on top of that, it smelled really weird— the student population came out here to smoke and hook up and play pranks, so she could only imagine what the source of the smell was. She could only stand to be there for so long, so she really wished her friends would hurry up.

"But wait," Will was shaking his head, not in agreement with Dustin's explanation of his findings, "the question says we're looking for *one* really heavy organism. How does a colony of trees count? That can't be right."

"I initially thought so, too," Dustin admitted, underlining the assertion with a wave of a hand that was still holding the last quarter or so of the sandwich he was eating. "But I found it in three books last night mentioned as the heaviest organism on the planet, so clearly scientists have a different opinion on that."

"Wait," Max intervened suddenly, frowning a little as she thought about it. "What did you say the name of this thing was? Panda?"

"Pando," Dustin corrected quickly. It had sounded funny to El the first time he'd said that the tree colony had a name, but then she figured if you were trying to get tourists to visit Utah, giving your unique attraction a unique name would make it easier for people to talk about it than calling it a "really big, really old colony of trees that you should find particularly impressive for some undefined reason."

"Yeah, that sounds familiar to me," Max divulged, pensive. "I think my dad might've told me about it once. He wanted us to go there—but it was just before the divorce, so we never went," she added with a shrug. "He said it was supposed to be this amazing thing because it's not several different trees; they're literally all the *same* tree."

"Like clones?" Will asked, surprised.

"Genetic identicals," Mike gasped, putting two and two together. "That *would* make the entire colony only one single organism, in a way."

"Yeah, and their roots are all supposedly connected underground," Max added, mimicking conjoined roots with her hands in a way that made El chuckle. "This has gotta be it, guys. This is our answer," she insisted, starting to grin in excitement.

El wanted to share that excitement with her— and she did, up to a point, because having an answer to their last academic question on the scavenger hunt was no small feat— but there was something still nagging in the back of her mind. "That might be the answer to the trivia question," she pointed out seriously, "but that doesn't mean it's the answer to the clue as a whole. How are we supposed to find a giant colony of cloned trees in a used-car dealership?" she reminded everyone, crossing her arms.

Everyone's shoulders slumped as they recognized that she was making a good point. They were silent for a minute or so as they contemplated this new conundrum and what it meant for their possibilities of winning the contest. They were close, so close, but now that they only had one clue left to complete, it really did matter how long it took them to complete it. Not only because the deadline for submitting their answer was on Friday afternoon and it was already Tuesday, but also because even if they submitted it before the deadline, they would only win if they came in *first*. And they had no way of knowing how far ahead or behind them any other teams were. All they knew was that they couldn't afford to waste time just standing there and thinking. Every minute was precious.

In the end, it was Lucas who broke the silence by snapping his fingers unexpectedly. "Wait, Dustin," he started. "What species did you say

these cloned trees were?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, uh," Dustin handed Will what was left over of his sandwich (which Will received noticeably gingerly, probably trying to avoid getting his hands full of mayonnaise) so he could open the biology textbook he was carrying under his other arm. It took him a little bit of time to find the correct page, but eventually he said, "Here, it's a, uh... quaking aspen."

Lucas's eyebrows lifted high on his forehead as if this revelation held some crucial significance to him. "As in the *Dodge Aspen*?" he asked, and everybody's jaws dropped.

"We have to find a Dodge Aspen in a used-car dealership!" Will summarized in a joyful exclamation, leading to a brand new round of cheers that were so loud that a group of freshmen passing in front of the mouth of the alley paused in their steps so they could stare at the suddenly celebrating group.

"Okay, okay, we need a game plan," Mike intervened once the cheering started to go down, always the first one to be thinking ahead, which made El smile proudly without really meaning to. "We can't waste any time. Luckily we've got three cars today, so we'll split up, and each pair will head to one of the dealerships on El and Max's list and see if they have any Dodge Aspens." After they found the answer to the location question the previous night, El and Max had looked in the yellow pages for car dealerships within the Hawkins city limits, and they found exactly three. They couldn't be sure which one was the correct one, so they would have to check all three, hence Mike's "game plan."

Everyone agreed, and they started pouring out of the alley so they could make use of what little was left of their lunch period, but before El could follow them, she felt Mike tug at her hand, so she turned back to look at him. "Hey, uh, do you wanna partner up with me?" he asked softly in that adorably tentative way of his. "When we go to the car dealerships, I mean."

He sounded so hopeful, and El hated that she had to disappoint him. "I *really* would love to," she stressed, hoping he could see how reluctant she was to be saying this, "but... I don't think that's a good

idea right now."

His smile started visibly dropping and she hurried to clarify. "It's not because I don't want to spend time with you, because I do," she said, squeezing his hand a little to show that she really meant it. "It's just that... I haven't really told my dad about us yet," she admitted, "and if he sees you dropping me off *again*, he's going to start wondering, and I don't want him to think I'm hiding things from him." She bit her lip lightly before adding, "So it's probably better if I just go with Max, for now."

"Oh," Mike said. "Yeah, of course. I can just go with Will, then," he assured her with a nod, and she felt herself relax. He understood. She'd been worried because she didn't want him to think she regretted anything that happened between them over the weekend, didn't want there to be any misunderstandings or stumbles in the beginning because every time she was near him it just felt so, so right.

"Well... can I at least walk you to your next class, then?" he asked instead, shifting gears, and *that* she could definitely agree to.

They (finally!) walked out of the alley and around the gym, headed toward the main building, holding hands all the way. She noticed that some people shot them looks of surprise as they walked by. She wasn't bothered by it; new relationships popped up every other day in high school and she was sure the novelty would wear off soon enough. She could see that Mike was quieter than usual, though, and wondering if the sudden attention was bothering him. "Hey," she bumped him lightly with her shoulder as they walked into the main building, "you okay?"

"Yeah," he replied, shaking his head. "Just thinking, um... when were you planning on telling your dad?" he asked, seeming a little nervous. "Not that I'm trying to rush you or anything. I mean, it hasn't even occurred to me to mention any of this to my parents," he added hurriedly, "just, y'know, it kinda *just* hit me that your dad is the chief of police and that's... that's a little scary, to say the least."

He might've been joking, but there was just the slightest bit of panic beneath his tone and El had to laugh. "Don't worry, he's all bark and

no bite. But I do want to tell him before Homecoming, though. I know we're not technically going together, but I know he's going to ask, and I'd rather just tell him."

"What are you going to tell him, though?" he asked as they turned a corner leading to the hallway where the classroom for El's English class could be found. Some people were still staring at them, but by this point they were so into their conversation, they weren't really paying attention to any of that anymore. "Like... are you going to tell him that I'm your..."

"...boyfriend?" she finished his sentence when he hesitated, biting back a smile at how flustered he got at just the word. It made her heart beat a little faster, too. "I *could*," she said as they stopped in front of the door to her English classroom, just a little off to the side so they could let other students pass. "I mean, if that's okay with you."

The smile he gave her was so brilliant that it warmed her from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. "I am very, *very* okay with that," he said, and those words made El so happy that she felt she was going to float on air to her next class.

"Okay. Cool," she smiled back at him.

"Cool," he replied, still grinning so wide that his cheeks must've been hurting. That's what she thought the problem was when, a moment later, he let out a pained groan, completely out of the blue. But it wasn't his cheeks; instead, he surprised her by lowering his voice to a whisper. "I really want to kiss you right now," he admitted, which sent a thrill down her spine because it felt like it had been so long since she last felt his lips press against hers, "but I can practically *feel* Ms. Sanders's eyes boring holes into the back of my head, so I'm thinking that's not a good idea."

The sudden turn of the sentence made her burst into a fit of giggles, and she leaned a little to the side so she could see past Mike's shoulder to confirm the fact that, indeed, her English teacher was glaring straight in their direction through the open doorway, as if urging them to finalize their dalliances and get to their respective classrooms already. "Yeah, better not. Raincheck?"

"Definitely," he replied, giving her hand one last squeeze— which only served to remind her how reluctant she was to let go, even just for a little while. Boy, was she in deep. "I'll see you in the parking lot before we leave?"

"Yeah," she agreed, and he turned to walk back up the way they'd come from, headed for his own class. She watched him move down the hallway until he disappeared past the corner, and then turned to her own classroom with a sigh, wondering if she'd be able to focus on *Animal Farm* at all when thinking of kissing Mike Wheeler was a much more pleasing alternative.

.
. .

There were few things Mike hated more in the world than Physical Education class. Being tall, lanky, physically weak and somewhat of a klutz, he'd never done well in it, plus he was sure Mr. Carr had it in for him since the first day he stepped into the halls of Hawkins High. (And whoever decided that there should be *two* PE requirements in high school could burn in hell, as far as Mike was concerned.)

So yeah, he hated PE. But if there was one thing he hated *more* than PE, it was being in the locker rooms *after* PE and having to listen to Troy brag to his flunkies about something or other that was usually nowhere near as impressive as he wanted to make it sound.

Mike and the guys had been dealing with Troy since forever. Thankfully, it wasn't nearly as bad now as it was back in elementary or even middle school— at some point after they entered high school, Troy had shifted his preferred method of entertainment from pummeling nerdlings to booze, sex, and parties. Not that he didn't physically assault some poor sucker every once in a while, but by now Mike and his friends were savvy enough to know how to stay out of his way.

Which is why in cases like the one he was currently in, Mike would make sure to find himself an ensconced little corner of the locker

room where few people could spot him and he could change without being bothered, and then just wait until Troy and the rest of his crew left to make his way out for his next class.

This usually worked out well for him; the only downside was that it meant he had to listen to the jocks' inane conversations for far longer than any decent person should. Usually it involved them speaking crudely and graphically about their girlfriends— or the girls they were hooking up with, as it were— in ways that made Mike feel like smashing his own face against a locker just to drown out the sound, talking about some upcoming party and who'd be getting the drunkest and puking in whose car, or reliving the glory moments of their football campaigns.

Today's thread of conversation, however, was not nearly as inane, and actually rather consequential for Mike and his friends, so he couldn't help but pay attention for once, taking advantage of the fact that he was mostly out of sight.

"...I don't know, man," Troy was telling James as he changed, talking about Stacey. "Sure, she puts out, but she's getting kinda clingy again." He threw something down— his gym t-shirt, Mike figured— with a loud thud. "Maybe I'll just dump her after this scavenger-hunt thing is over. After all," he scoffed obnoxiously, "once I've met Brock Sorenson, every girl in the school is going to want a piece of this, am I right?"

The other boys jeered at him, and Mike rolled his eyes, shaking his head at the fact that *that* piece of shit was considered "cooler" than him and his friends in any way. "How can you be so sure you're gonna win?" one of the other jocks asked him.

"Because I've got the inside track, my dude," Troy replied, followed by what sounded like a snapping sound such as from a towel. Really, could they be any more of a cliché? "You know my uncle's car dealership? Well, last night, he called to tell me that they're the last location for the scavenger hunt." That's about the point where Mike's ears perked up, suddenly very interested in the conversation. "Yeah, and he told me no one has gotten to the clue yet. So we're going there this afternoon; he'll tell us what the answer to the clue is, we'll take the stupid picture, and boom, we win."

Damn. That meant that if they waited until school to go through the dealerships as he and the others had planned earlier, Troy's team might still beat them to it. They needed a new plan, a quick one—and it was all on Mike.

"I would've just skipped this joint and gone already if it wasn't because stupid old man Jablonski caught me cheating on a test last year and now he's itching to fail me on the goddamn class again..."

Mike waited until the jocks were done changing and on their way out of the gym before rushing out of the locker room faster than he ever had in his life and running to the main building's back entrance like his life depended on it. He wasn't sure what the plan was yet, he just knew he needed to find at least one of his friends, and he needed to find them *now*.

With his luck, most of them would already be in their next class, whatever that was— because he always waited until the jocks were gone to come back from gym class, he tended to make it to Spanish just in the nick of time— so he started peering into every classroom he walked by to see if he could catch a glimpse of any of them. Just his luck, when he carefully peered in through the glass panel on the door to Ms. Sweeney's Trig class, he caught sight of El sitting on the second seat of the row directly beside the window.

He hesitated for a moment. He knew that El had told him earlier that she'd rather go with Max to the car dealership, but on the other hand he really couldn't waste more time peeking into every classroom in the building in search of one of his other friends. And he couldn't go by himself; the rules explicitly said the photos had to be *team* photos, so he was afraid if he was the only one on the picture, they wouldn't count it. So it was either breaking El out of class now or wasting more time and possibly losing to *Troy*.

He dropped his bag on the ground beside the door and pumped himself up. He could do this. He'd taken classes with Ms. Sweeney before, and she loved him. No way this would fail, right? He just had to put on his best *I'm-a-good-student-why-would-I-be-lying-to-you?* face and... go for it.

Taking a deep breath for resolve, he pushed the door open, gently

knocking on it as he crossed the doorway. "Um, excuse me, Ms. Sweeney?"

The teacher stopped speaking halfway through her greeting her class for the period to turn her head and look at Mike. "Mr. Wheeler. What do you need?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw El smiling at him and giving him a small wave, but he couldn't let himself get distracted. "Er, I was sent to get El Hopper?" he let the teacher know, hoping he wasn't coming across as too hesitant. That would just give him away. "Uh, Ms. Tanaka needs to talk to her urgently." He saw El frown, probably curious as to what the Guidance Counselor would need with her at this hour.

The woman looked at him pensively for a couple of seconds and for a little while there Mike was sure she was going to call his bluff or ask for some kind of proof, but eventually she just nodded her head and waved at El to go on. Mike watched as she got up and started picking up her stuff, stopping to get a pass from Ms. Sweeney on her way out.

Once the two were out of the classroom with the door safely closed behind them, she turned to him, curious. "Hey," she started. "What's going on? What does Ms. Tanaka need me for? I don't think I've spoken to her more than twice in all my years of high school."

Mike leaned down to grab his own bag, shaking his head as he shouldered it. "Sorry, I just needed an excuse to get you out of there. Listen," he signaled for her not to speak when it seemed like she was about to ask something else. "I overheard Troy saying that his uncle owns the car dealership where the last clue is and that he and his team are going there after school to get their last photo."

El gasped. "That means we have to get there before that!"

Mike nodded as he started looking for his car keys in his bag. "Exactly. And we have no time to get the others, so it's gonna have to be you and me, right now." He finally found them, gesturing to El to start walking with a nod of his head. "Can you go first? I don't actually have a hall pass."

It was her turn to nod. "Yeah, of course," she agreed immediately, starting to lead the way toward the main entrance. "Did Troy say which car dealership it was?"

Mike shook his head, before realizing she was walking ahead of him so she obviously couldn't see his gesture. "No," he vocalized instead, "we're going to have to stop at all three. Is the coast clear?" he asked as El looked past a corner, checking to see if there were any teachers or hall monitors around.

"Yeah. Come on," she urged him forward, and boy, things were starting to get a little too *Mission: Impossible* for a little while there for Mike's tastes. As stealthily as they could, they did eventually manage to get to the main entrance and to Mike's car without running into anyone. El pulled out the list of the three locations she and Max had written down on Monday, and quickly directing Mike to their first destination, they pulled out of the parking lot about fifteen minutes into their last period.

"How are we going to do this?" she asked once they were on their way to the first dealership. "If we tell Troy's uncle we're there for the contest, he might not even show us the car."

"We're going to have to bluff our way through it," Mike answered, already annoyed that he was having to do so much of *that* on the same day. "We'll say your dad wants to buy you a used car for your birthday or something, and we want to take a picture so we can show it to him. It'll be fine."

Her eyes went so wide, it was almost comical. "I don't even have a driver's license!"

Mike had to chuckle. "So what? It's not like you're going to have to drive the thing, this is just to get us in the door." He shook his head, amused. "Shouldn't you be better at this kind of stuff? Your dad's a cop. Shouldn't the whole 'undercover' thing, like, pass onto you by osmosis or something?"

She stared at him with her mouth gaping open for a good ten seconds before bursting out into laughter. "That is *by far* the nerdiest thing anyone has ever said to me in my life," she declared, the sentence

punctuated by hiccups as she laughed.

He snorted. "Yeah, well— that's me: king of the nerds!" he said sarcastically.

Still chuckling, she shook her head and leaned to the side to poke him in his upper arm. "Yes, well, lucky for you, I think it's cute," she admitted, and the knowledge made him grin uncontrollably. He'd finally found a girl who truly liked him, quirks and all. How lucky was he? "We'll figure it out," she added, going back to what they would do when they arrived at the dealership. Mike figured his suggestion was better than nothing.

The first dealership was a bust; there were no Dodge Aspens there. There was one parked in front of the second dealership, but it was a customer's car; it wasn't really for sale. Plus, when they asked the owner if he was related to Troy, he said he didn't know any Troys, so they figured this couldn't be the place, either way.

So, with limited time to get it right, they headed straight for the last location on El's list, Hoosiers of Hawkins, and got ready to put on a production.

When they got there, they were greeted by a salesman, whom they proceeded to ask about the availability of Dodge Aspens in their, uh, fine establishment. "Ah, it's your lucky day! We have a couple of them in great condition and at some great prices. Follow me and I'll show them to you."

He led them down the rows of parked cars toward two Aspens: a 1978 green one that said it was in "fair" condition but in Mike's opinion looked like it would crumble over if someone gave it a light kick, and a 1980 red one that looked like it had seen better days, but seemed in working condition, at least.

The salesman was just telling them all the virtues (and none of the flaws) of the car when they were approached by an older man with a copious dark mustache and a beer belly just barely concealed by the suit he was wearing. "Well, would ya look at this cute couple right here!" the man said with a rough, sonorous laugh as he came to stand next to Mike, clapping his shoulder so hard that it made Mike flinch.

"Who's looking to get a car today, huh? Is it you? You?" He signaled to each of them as he spoke.

Mike pointed to El, and El raised her hand simultaneously, falling into an already practiced scene. "My dad wants to buy me a car for my birthday," she explained with a small smile, and Mike was glad she was coming across convincingly because as it was, he could barely hold the instinct to flinch away from the older man. He looked so much like Troy, there was no doubt where their classmate had gotten his ugliness genes. "I was thinking maybe an Aspen."

"Good choice, girlie, good choice," the man nodded, patting the hood of the car like it was a pet dog or something. "Good car. It's a good car. But wouldn't you rather get a Cavalier, instead? They're our best sellers, you see. And you could get a newer model, too. At a great price, of course. Great prices all around."

El's smile tightened a little bit— the only sign that her patience with car salespeople was starting to fray, and it was only because Mike had been looking at her and cataloging her smiles for years that he was able to tell. "I'd rather have the Aspen, thanks," she said perfectly politely, no sign whatsoever in her voice that she was starting to get aggravated. "Actually, I was hoping I could take a picture with it so I could show it to my dad?"

"Yes, sure, sure, whatever you kids need." Since he thought they were close to purchasing one of his cars, the man was nothing but accommodating. He signaled to the other salesman to come and take the picture with Mike's camera, even going so far as to pose with them while holding a large sign that said: "Only \$1200 at Hoosiers of Hawkins!" (*What a ripoff*, Mike couldn't help but think.)

The two older men stood off to the side talking shop while he and El waited for the photo to develop. Slowly but surely the image of the three of them (and the large sign) in front of the car began appearing, and while he and El couldn't say anything that would reveal their true motive to the men, they couldn't help but grin at each other ecstatically.

This was it! They'd won! They were going to meet Brock Sorenson! Mike was so happy he couldn't help but pick El up and twirl her

around, prompting a squeal and a fit of giggles from her as he did so. When he finally put her down, her arms around his neck, all he had to do was lean down a little to capture her lips like he'd been wanting to do since Sunday.

"Ah, young love! Ain't it grand?" Troy's uncle said when he spotted them kissing, causing them to spring away from each other in embarrassment. The man didn't seem to notice, though, walking up right beside Mike and putting a hand on his shoulder again. With a gruff laugh, he leaned in to talk in Mike's ear, as if imparting some secret wisdom. "Tap that, my boy. Tap it often, while everything down there's still workin', if you know what I mean."

With a frown, Mike shrugged the man's hand off. "Yeah, thanks," he mumbled, not needing to be a genius to realize where Troy got his disgustingness genes from, either. "Come on, El, let's go back." She nodded, thankfully not having heard the man's comment, and followed him back to his car, with the other salesman calling out to them to come back with her father once they made their decision.

They drove back to Hawkins High so fast, it was a miracle Mike didn't get a ticket. And wouldn't that have been the cherry on top, he wondered as he turned onto the street where both Hawkins Middle and Hawkins High were located, if his first time meeting El's dad as her boyfriend was while getting a ticket for speeding?

They made it to the school just a few minutes after the final bell rang, while students were still filing out of the front entrance. As he parked his car in his still-empty spot from earlier, he was not surprised to find Lucas, Will, Dustin and Max huddled up beside Lucas's truck as if waiting for them. "Where the hell have you guys been?" Lucas demanded when they got out of the station wagon. "We were supposed to meet here after school, but you two were just gone!"

Before Mike could launch into the full story, El, with a bright smile on her face, handed the developed Polaroid to the nearest person, which turned out to be Will. "Is this...?" he trailed off as he looked down at the photo, then looked up at El and Mike again.

Mike smiled at his friends' confused expressions as he nodded. "It is," he said, and then went on to explain everything that had happened

since lunch while his friends passed the photo around, as delicately as if it was going to crumble if they touched it a little too hard.

When he finished, and it started to dawn on them that *they had won*, Mike could see that they all wanted to cheer much as he and El had at the dealership, but they all knew they couldn't draw attention to themselves while in the school's parking lot; if Troy, Stacey, or any of their cronies realized the nerds had just beat them to the last clue, they'd do anything to get rid of the photo, and that would be disastrous. No, that Polaroid needed to be protected with their lives in the distance between the parking lot and Ms. Tanaka's office.

They all looked at each other in abject wonder for a moment, before almost in unison starting to race walk toward the front entrance of the school.

.
.
.

Ms. Tanaka, of course, could not confirm that they had won the scavenger hunt, but they celebrated like she had, nonetheless, heading out to Pizza One the moment they left her office to share a family-size mushroom and pepperoni pizza and collectively fantasize about the epic conversations they were going to have with Brock Sorenson when they met him.

"But you know who's going to *really* freak out when we meet him?" Dustin commented out loud while grabbing his bag on the way out of the booth they'd occupied for the entirety of their meal. "Claudia."

Lucas *tsk*-ed at him. "There's no way your mother even knows who Brock Sorenson is," he declared, and while El hadn't yet met Dustin's mom, she figured Lucas and the other boys had known Dustin for long enough that they had his mom pegged down by now. From Dustin's tales Claudia Henderson could sometimes come across as a little ditzzy, but the others seemed to like her well enough, so El hoped she could meet her someday.

Dustin smirked. "Nah, she's never even heard of Brock Sorenson, but you know how she gets with celebrities, right? Now imagine her baby meeting face to face with one of the biggest movie stars on the planet. She is going to flip her shit."

"Wait, Mews is meeting Brock Sorenson, too?!" Max intervened, bringing up Dustin's cat, whom they knew well because he also featured quite prominently in the boy's tall tales of life at home. The curly-haired boy responded to Max's teasing with a roll of his eyes and a nasally "ha, ha" that made Max laugh. El did not miss the fact that Dustin's mock glare melted into a soft smile as he listened to the redhead giggle at her own joke.

As Max finally was free to slide out of her side of the booth, she turned to El. "Hey, you're coming with me, right?" she asked, but just as El was about to reply in the affirmative, she felt Mike touch her lightly on her elbow, pulling her attention gently.

"Actually, I was hoping you'd let me drive you home, instead," he said, meaning only El, but really putting the question up for consideration by both, since the outcome of his suggestion affected them both.

El frowned. "We already spoke about this earlier, remember?" she asked him, wondering if he'd just forgotten the conversation they'd had in the alley at lunch after all their friends had left. "How it's probably not a good idea for my dad to see you drop me off at home for the third time in as many weeks?"

"Well, yeah," Mike nodded, letting her know that he hadn't forgotten. "But I was thinking, if you're going to tell your dad about us anyway, then there's really no point in me staying away, don't you think?" he added with a shrug.

"Ooh, you're going to tell the chief that you're dating?" Max asked, arching her eyebrows high on her forehead at this little nugget of information El hadn't gotten to telling her yet. Switching her gaze from one to the other, she let out a whistle. "Sounds official," she commented. "So... is it official?"

El ignored the question, knowing that she was going to have to tell

Max the whole story of how Mike asked her to be his girlfriend (or more accurately, never quite asked her but they came to that conclusion either way). El knew she was going to have to take her time with it, giving her best friend all the details, but she thought that could wait a little, at least until she didn't have to worry about how to tell her dad. So she ignored the question, and Max didn't push. In the meantime, Mike was right: It was probably better for her to just bite the bullet and tell her dad already. No sense in dawdling.

"Okay," she told him with a smile, actually rather glad that she would get a little bit more time with him that night. It was mindblowing in a way: they'd already spent most of their day together, and El wasn't even starting to get tired of being around him yet. She just really, really liked him. "I'll call you after I talk to my dad, okay?" she told Max, who nodded, knowing that she would get the full story soon enough.

In the background, Dustin and Will played a round of rock/paper/scissors to decide who would get shotgun in Lucas's car. They ended up doing best two out of three because Dustin complained that Will always chose paper just to throw him off his game. Will won anyway.

El's place was fairly close to Benny's, so even when they took the long way 'round, they made it to her house in about five minutes. The short trip was quiet, with El spending most of the time fiddling with the radio until coming to land on a pop station that was playing Rick Astley, much to Mike's eternal dismay. "You and my dad would get along," she said, laughing at the pained groan he let out when the familiar chorus started blaring out of the speakers. "He makes that exact same noise whenever this song comes up when I'm in his car."

"Good," Mike chuckled. "He's got a good ear for terrible music."

El mock-pouted at him. "What? You don't think it's romantic?" she asked, turning up the volume on the radio as loud as it could go. "This song is super romantic!"

"I think it's overplayed, is what it is!" Mike shouted, and El was barely able to hear him over the sound of the music.

Biting back a smile, she rolled her eyes at him in an exaggerated

fashion. "Alright, music snob," she threw back, lowering the volume again until the music was down to a decent level. "It's almost like you're trying to take Jonathan's place now that he's gone or something," she added, prompting him to scoff. "But you know what? It's okay if you don't like the song, because *I just wanna tell you what I'm feeling...*"

Mike burst into laughter when she started singing along with the radio. "Oh, really, you're going to do that now?" he asked, his dark eyes gleaming with amusement as he turned his head to look at her. "That's cute. Real cute." She stuck her tongue out at him before singing the next line.

"Oh, look, we're here," he said in an exaggerated fashion as he started to brake nearing the curb of her house. Once he was close enough, he put the car in park. "Such a pity you won't be able to finish out the song. You were so excited about it, after all."

She winked at him. "That's okay. It's going to stay stuck in your head for the rest of the night, anyway." He groaned again, and she had to laugh. "Look at it on the bright side: at least it'll make you think of me," she added in a bubbly tone, giving him a sweet smile as she unbuckled her seat belt.

He snorted. "I don't really need a song for that to happen," he muttered in that dry tone of his that always made her laugh, but despite the sarcasm, she thought the sentiment itself actually quite delightful. It made her feel fuzzy inside to know that he thought about her when they were not together; it made her want to giggle uncontrollably.

She stretched out a hand to cradle his cheek, turning his head to look at her. "That's sweet," she said, leaning in to kiss him. Just like every other time their lips had met since Sunday, her heart started beating faster right away, and she felt her breath catch as his hand came to rest against the sensitive skin of her nape.

She felt like she could melt into him. She wanted to. She'd spent almost the entire day by his side, and now that it came time to say goodbye, she just couldn't bring herself to do it. She initially intended this kiss to be that goodbye gesture, but now all she wanted was to

keep kissing him until her lungs gave out. Man, she was addicted.

His breath came out in a sigh when they pulled apart, and he leaned his forehead against hers as if he didn't want to get too far away, either. "You don't think your dad is watching us through the window, do you?" he asked, and it took her a second for the question to parse in her mind. His lips had effectively vanished all her worries about her father out of her head.

She chuckled. "Probably not," she decided, knowing that while her dad was definitely home—the Blazer was parked in its spot in the garage—he was probably more concerned with a beer and a baseball game at the moment. Nah; if he was going to find out that Mike had dropped her off yet again, it would be because he asked her who drove her back from Benny's.

She rubbed her nose against his almost sadly, knowing she couldn't put off the inevitable anymore. "I'll call you later to tell you how it went?" she said in lieu of a proper goodbye. He nodded with an "mm-hmm" sound and gave her one last peck on the lips, pulling back with a smile.

She opened her door and, hugging her book bag to her chest, took a step out of the car, pushing the door closed behind her. She was just about to take a step toward her house when a thought occurred to her, and she spun back toward the car, leaning forward to look at him through the open window. "Hey, you wanna come in?" she offered in a hopeful manner, but also a little cautious. She was hoping he'd say yes, but at the same time she didn't want to push him if he wasn't ready for the big meeting-the-parents moment. After all, they'd only been officially dating a few hours.

He watched her carefully for a moment, and she thought she could tell pretty well what he was thinking. It's not like he hadn't been over before, and he'd even already met her father the previous week, but not like this. Obviously he understood that she wanted him to be there when she told her dad she had a boyfriend and was weighing how scary it would be for the chief of police to be aware that he was dating his daughter, particularly when the revelation came within shooting distance.

She smiled at him, trying to assuage the instinctive fear, and she must've done something right because he took a deep breath and nodded his head. "Yeah, sure." He turned the car off, pulling the key from the ignition, and unbuckled his seat belt before opening the driver-side door and getting out of the car.

Walking around the front of the car, she offered him her hand to hold, figuring they might as well come in strong straight out of the gate. "Ready?" she asked, intertwining her fingers with his and squeezing his hand in reassurance.

"Ready," he replied, and together they walked toward her front door.

.

.

Notes: Troy is an awful human being. Kids, don't be like Troy. (Or Troy's uncle, either. Dude's absolutely disgusting.)

Blue whales are the largest animals known to have ever existed; in average they weigh between 45 and 136 tonnes and measure between 87 and 100 feet in length. Giant redwoods are the most massive individual trees in the world, growing to an average height between 164 and 279 feet with some 20-26 feet trunk diameter. Pando (which is latin for "I spread out") is a clonal colony of one individual male quaking aspen with a massive underground root system, located in the Fishlake National Forest in south-central Utah. It occupies 106 acres and is estimated to weigh over thirteen *million* pounds; it's also one of the oldest known living organisms at over eighty thousand years of age.

Osmosis is when solvent molecules move through a semi-permeable membrane from the side with a low concentration of dissolved material to the side with a high concentration of dissolved material. The Dodge Aspen was a compact car model produced by Chrysler between 1976 and 1980. It was the car of the year in 1976. For reference, it cost around \$4000 back in the 80s, and the 1980 model would be worth around \$900 after being used for 8 years, so Mike was quite right to call Hoosiers of Hawkins' offer a ripoff. The

Chevrolet Cavalier was a compact car produced by General Motors between 1982 and 2005; it was the best-selling car of 1985.

While *Mission: Impossible* is now mostly known for the movie franchise starring Tom Cruise which began in 1996, a little-known fact is that the film franchise is actually based on a 1966 TV show of the same name, which aired on CBS until 1973. The character of IMF leader Jim Phelps, played by Jon Voight in the 1996 movie, is actually the same character who was the lead in the 1966 show, except back then he was played by Peter Graves. There was also a TV revival of the show in 1988, so it would just be starting to air around the time this story takes place.

Poor Mike just got rickrolled! xD The song El plays on the radio was, of course *Never Gonna Give You Up* by Rick Astley. It came in at no. 4 in the list of Billboard Hot 100 for 1988 and, over two decades later, came back to popularity as the centerpiece of one of the greatest (and most annoying) memes the internet has ever birthed. It's now going to stay stuck in your head for *at least* the rest of the day and I'm not even a little bit sorry. Also for any young'uns who might be scratching their head at the concept of El and Max looking in the yellow pages- phone directories used to be distributed as actual physical books back in the day. Quaint, isn't it? ;)

If you've been following my Quiet Moments series for a while, you might recognize Ms. Sanders and Mr. Carr. And that's it for the five clues! Next week is the resolution, which, fair warning, might be a little late because I'm thinking of rewriting certain bits and adding an extra scene, so it might take me a day or two longer than usual. But we'll definitely see whether the party wins the scavenger hunt or not. What do you guys think? Will they get to meet Brock Sorenson? Let me know in a comment.

7. The Resolution

Searching For Your Heart, The Resolution. PG-13, romance/fluff/friendship, no-powers AU, Mike/Eleven.

One of the world's biggest action movie superstars is coming to town, and every kid in Hawkins High is determined to win MTV's back-to-school scavenger hunt and get a face-to-face meeting with their idol. Mike and his friends are sure they've got this in the bag— until the contest throws a wrench in their plans and their only shot at winning is partnering up with Mike's longtime crush, El Hopper.

Note: This is a high-school AU where Eleven doesn't have her powers, but it still takes place in the 80s because the internet would make it way too easy, lol. xD

.

It's not that Mike had expected the announcement that he had a girlfriend to be some huge deal or anything, but he'd at least expected it to make a little bit more of a splash than *this*.

The most immediate reaction to his unexpected declaration at the dinner table on Thursday night was Holly's, which consisted of blinking at him repeatedly and then exclaiming a visceral "Yuck!" as if the mere thought of anyone choosing to date *him* was unthinkable. He glared at her, but tried not to take it personally— she was just in the "the opposite sex has cooties" stage and anyone having a girlfriend or boyfriend was yucky to her.

It took his father a few more seconds to process the revelation, only looking up from his meatloaf when he felt his wife's pointed look on him. "Did you just say you have a girlfriend? A real one?" Mike tried really hard not to roll his eyes. "Well," was the extent of Ted's reaction when Mike confirmed that, yes, his girlfriend was not imaginary. "Good on you, son," he then added in a monotone before returning to his dinner like nothing had happened.

His mother, bless her heart, at least *tried* to be supportive. "That's great, sweetie!" Karen said once she stopped glaring at Ted, turning to her middle child with a warm smile. "Is it that El girl you've been hanging out with lately?" she inquired, launching into a quick few questions as Mike did his best to describe El to her, and making sure to extend a dinner invitation for this girl who has suddenly become so important in her son's life. Of course, that took all of five minutes and then they all went back to being silent or listening to Holly complain about her friends from school.

He found himself almost missing Nancy— if she had been home for this, she would've teased him, for sure, but at least she would've shown a little bit more interest in El and how their relationship came to be. Maybe he ought to call his sister; that was something he hadn't done in quite a while. She'd probably like that.

After dinner he went up to his room, officially to work on school work but mostly just to sulk about the fact that his family simply couldn't seem to care about anything that was important to him. Maybe he could take a page out of Max's book and just spend more time at El's on the regular. Even though his girlfriend's father, the chief of police, was intimidating as all get out, he at least tried to get to know him somewhat. At least after the initial awkwardness of them coming in and revealing the new nature of their relationship, that is.

("Oh no. Are you kids doing that contest thing here again? Are the other four coming over, too? Kiddo, you gotta let me know this stuff ahead of time so that I can be mentally prepared to have my house invaded by a bunch of teenagers..."

"Nope. The others aren't coming today. Just the one boyfriend."

"...Huh.")

And sure, all through dinner he was subjected to the 1980s version of the Spanish Inquisition and it was quite possibly the scariest experience of his life, but considering El insisted the chief liked him and he'd made it through the evening without the older man expressly forbidding him from dating his only daughter, he figured he'd done okay.

He laid down on his bed looking up at the glow-in-the-dark star stickers on his ceiling while musing to himself about how much easier El would have it, meeting his family. Sure, his father would probably be disinterested at best or unwittingly put his foot in his mouth at worst, but his mother was going to *love* El; she was so perfectly polite and open and sociable, it was hard to imagine that she wouldn't win Karen over within seconds of arriving at their home. Even Holly, despite her current reticence about boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, was sure to like El solely on the basis that she was pretty and sweet, and decidedly cooler than Mike could ever be. They'd probably bond over their mutual love of New Kids on the Block or something.

He was still thinking about this when the phone rang. Stretching his hand to grab the device on his side table (he'd pulled Nancy's line into his room after his sister left for college— not like she was going to use it, right?) and picked up the call before anyone else at home could get to it. "Hello?"

"Hey there, stranger," El's voice came through the line and just like that he felt the corners of his mouth start quirking up, all his previous moodiness lifted in a second. "Whatcha doing?"

He chuckled. "It's like I called you with my mind," he said, still smiling to himself. One of the best parts of their relationship being *official* was that they could now talk to each other on the phone whenever they wanted without it being pointed out as odd by other people, and without it getting awkward because of hidden feelings they were both afraid to reveal. Sure, they'd seen each other just a few hours ago while at school, but it already felt like it had been too long since he'd heard her voice, and he was glad she had thought to call him.

"Aww," he heard her coo on the other side of the call. "You were thinking about me?"

He couldn't help but snort. "Well, I usually am," he admitted, glad that she wasn't there to see him blush, "but today more than ever because over dinner I told my family about you, so I kinda had that in mind when I came back up to my room."

"Oh," El exclaimed, sounding surprised. "You should've told me you were going to do that. Did you want me to be there when you told them? I wouldn't have minded since you were here when I told my dad and all..."

"Nah, don't worry about it," he waved off her concern quickly. In fact, he rather preferred that she wasn't there, precisely because he didn't want her to witness firsthand his family's reaction— or rather, the lack thereof. "They're used to Nancy having boyfriends and such, so my having a girlfriend is not much of a novelty for them." That wasn't quite the reason for his family's disinterest, certainly, but he didn't want to bum El out from the get-go. "But, hey, my mom did ask me to extend a dinner invitation for you sometime soon," he added, knowing that at least put a better spin on things.

"That sounds nice," she replied in an upbeat tone of voice, sounding like she was truly looking forward to it. "I'd love to have dinner with your family. Maybe after we're done with the scavenger hunt?" she suggested. "It might be a little weird if we both end up doing the meet-the-parents routine before we've even gone on our first official date."

"Only because you don't want to count the minigolf course as an actual date," Mike retorted with a laugh as he brought an arm up to rest between his pillow and the back of his head. "You've got a point, though: We definitely want to be done with this whole Brock Sorenson frenzy before we even have to think about dealing with my family."

"Do you think they'll like me?" she asked in a small voice. She sounded nervous about it, which he thought was unnecessary but also adorable either way.

"Are you kidding? They're going to love you more than they love me," he said, remembering what he'd been thinking just before she called. "Besides, my mom's easy; all you have to do is compliment her cooking and you'll have her in the palm of your hand. Just ask Steve, he's been there already." Mike couldn't hold back an eye roll as he recalled the first time Steve had been over to his house for dinner back when he was dating Nancy. He'd laid it on so thick, he thought his mother was going to see right through it— but nope, she ate it all

up gleefully.

"In all seriousness, though," he added, wanting her to know that she really had nothing to be nervous about, "you don't have to worry. If they think you're even a fraction of how wonderful I know you are, they'll definitely love you."

There was silence on the other end of the line, and for a moment Mike worried he'd said too much, too soon. She hadn't taken his words to mean that he loved her, had she? Not that he *wouldn't*, of course, or that he *couldn't*— it would be easy, so easy, to fall head over heels for her, he could feel the pull there every time he thought about her, every time she was near him— but they'd only been officially dating for like three days and he didn't want to freak her out by moving too fast. Their story was just getting started.

Just as he was going to anxiously inquire whether she was still there, she spoke up again. "I'm—" she started, sounding a bit breathless. "Sorry, you're just— you're really sweet," she said, with a little bit of a giggle at the end of the sentence. "That's like the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"That can't be true," Mike couldn't stop himself from scoffing. It seemed impossible to him that a girl as incredible as El didn't get compliments thrown her way every day. If she truly didn't, then he was going to make damn sure he reminded her of how amazing she was every chance he got.

"No, I'm— I'm not just saying that," El insisted, and Mike imagined she was shaking her head as she spoke. She laughed a little again, a soft little sound that Mike adored. "Who would've thought that you'd turn out to be such a romantic, Mike Wheeler?"

"Well, I'm just stating the truth," Mike said with a sigh as he held the phone between the side of his face and his shoulder so he could lift his other arm under his head as well. Smiling to himself, he closed his eyes, chuffed that he'd managed to make her feel flattered, even without really meaning to. Maybe he wasn't as hopeless at this as he thought he was.

She giggled again. "You are—" She cut herself off abruptly as if she

needed the silence in order to hear something, and after a heartbeat of being quiet, she let out a groan. "Sorry. My dad fell asleep on the couch and if I don't wake him up soon, he's going to choke on his own snores. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, of course," Mike responded right away. "You sure you don't want me to pick you up?" He'd offered earlier in the week, too, to go pick her up in the morning every day just so they could get a little more time on their own, but she insisted that their school was on the way to the police station so her dad didn't mind dropping her off in the morning, and she didn't want Mike to have to go out of his way when it wasn't really necessary. He did, however, drive her back home most days that week, except on Wednesday when she had an extracurricular after school and therefore had to catch a ride back with Max.

"No, I'm good," she let him know once again. Mike didn't mind; as he understood it, she rather enjoyed the ride to school with her dad, so he wasn't about to get in the way of that. "If you'd like to wait for me at the entrance, though, I would love to greet my boyfriend with a kiss," she added in a suggestive tone and *that* Mike could definitely do.

He grinned. "Promise?"

"Promise," she confirmed, and he swore he could hear her smile through the line. He wished she could be here by his side instead and he could kiss her without having to wait until morning. "See you then," she whispered as a goodbye.

"Sleep tight," he wished her in kind and waited for a moment until he heard the click of the line closing on the other side before pushing himself up to a sitting position and stretching his arm so he could put the phone back in its base.

As he did so, he took a moment to stare at the device for a minute—almost like it was a visible connection, a tangible representation of this girl that he had such deep feelings for— and smiled, feeling much lighter than he had directly after dinner.

.

.

This was definitely the most fun El had had at a Homecoming dance in all her years of high school so far.

Sure, it probably didn't look that way from the outside, given that she was just sitting at a table with her chin on Mike's shoulder, watching as he and Will played cards. But even this was fun. She'd already danced more than her feet could handle— not just with Mike, though she certainly danced more than two (slow) dances with him, but with Will, Dustin, and Lucas, too, and even Max for a few rounds when the call of Cyndi Lauper was impossible to resist.

She'd laughed more than she ever had at a school function, and even just sitting there with her two favorite boys as the other three disappeared off somewhere on the dance floor (Lucas was trying to teach Max and Dustin to do the moonwalk— keyword being *trying*) was heaps better than waiting in a corner for someone to ask her to dance, or worse, having to dance with some entitled jerk because she wasn't assertive enough to refuse.

So when Lucas, Max, and Dustin went off on their own and Mike pulled out a deck of cards and Will's eyes brightened noticeably, El was all up for it. She pulled her chair close behind Mike's, wrapped her arms around his waist and proceeded to eagerly watch the match over his shoulder. Yes, it was the dorkiest thing ever, but it only endeared them even more to her, especially given how competitive they got over the simplest card game.

"You're cheating," Mike muttered under his breath, a little frustrated that he was running out of cards, and quick.

Will laughed. "How am I cheating?" He shook his head. "You can't cheat at War. All the cards are right there in front of you to see!" He laughed even harder when a joker of his beat Mike's five and allowed Will to steal a jack— one of Mike's only high cards.

Mike groaned, and he sounded so put out that even El had to laugh. "I'm coming for those jokers of yours, you'll see," he insisted as he put

down an eight that got beat by Will's queen of hearts. Will had the two jokers, and with them he had systematically *decimated* Mike's pile of cards.

"What, with all your threes and fours?" Will retorted with a snort, and El shook her head at her boyfriend's pout.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught a couple of people looking their way and pointing. They seemed interested rather than amused, so she figured it was more about the effortless intimacy of her current position with Mike than about the card game itself. If anyone at school didn't know before that night that she and Mike were dating, they certainly did now, given all the close dancing they did that night, not to mention sneaking kisses here and there whenever the chaperones weren't paying attention. Being in his arms like that was the best part of the night by far.

El didn't care who knew. She was ecstatic to be able to be with Mike, no matter what anyone had to say about it. Thankfully, the most likely people to want to butt in and make nasty comments about her relationship were Troy and Stacey, and they were currently too busy basking in their joint Homecoming King and Queen win— it had been a few years since both winners had been non-seniors, so they had a lot of bragging to do and that didn't leave much time for them to get up to their usual bullying tactics.

That was a relief not just for her and Mike, but also for the others. Sure, none of them had been particularly enthused by the fact that Troy and Stacey had won yet *another* popularity contest, but at least it kept them away from them for the night. And El was glad for that. She was really glad this Brock Sorenson scavenger hunt had brought them all together. They'd only been hanging out for a few weeks, but by now El couldn't imagine not hanging out with them anymore.

Other than with Max, she'd never felt any particular affinity with other kids her age, choosing instead to flit between groups and cliques with superficial ease but never really finding a personal connection with any one of them. The four boys— the "party"— had wormed their way into her heart very quickly and now she couldn't go back to the way things were before the contest. They felt like a team, like a unit, and she wanted to be a part of that for as long as

she could. She wanted to sit with them at lunch every day, spend time with them outside of school and during weekends, and just bask in their special brand of camaraderie that she'd never really experienced before. She hoped they felt the same way. It seemed to her like they did.

Mike was down to three measly cards (a two, a four, and a ten that so far had been his only saving grace) when the Guidance Counselor's voice interrupted the music over the loudspeakers. "Hello, yes, can we please turn the music down a little bit? Thank you," Ms. Tanaka added as the DJ did as she requested. "All right, everyone! It's that time everyone's been waiting for: We're going to announce the winners of MTV's Back-to-school scavenger hunt!"

They quickly put away the cards and started making their way toward the stage at the back of the gym as Ms. Tanaka presented the representatives from MTV's public relations office and the Hawkins school board, who were there to ensure fairness. El was barely paying attention; she was looking around for the rest of her friends and was relieved to find Lucas waving at the three of them from somewhere near the stage. They quickly wove their way through the crowd to get to their friends, where Max excitedly linked her arm with El's as they waited on bated breath for Ms. Tanaka to reveal the winner.

For one breathless moment El tunnel-visioned— or more accurately she got tunnel *hearing*, as she sort of tuned out every sound around her except for the echo of Ms. Tanaka's voice coming from the speakers, and the reverberation of Dustin reflexively repeating "Dustin Henderson Dustin Henderson Dustin Henderson Dustin Henderson" under his breath directly behind her. El could only see the back of the head of the kid standing in front of her, could only feel the tight grip of Max's arm on hers, and it was a bit like what she imagined having an out-of-body experience would feel like. Her heart was beating so fast.

Had they really done it? Had they won? Had all their hard work, their hours and hours of research and effort and frustration, really paid off? Could it be?

Then Ms. Tanaka said, "The team that got all five scavenger-hunt clues correct in the least amount of time, who will get to meet Brock

Sorenson in person in a face-to-face meeting tomorrow night, are... the team led by Dustin Henderson!" and it was like the world around her erupted into cheers.

Max *screamed* and grabbed both of El's arms, jumping up and down and forcing her to do the same. Dustin got so excited that he grabbed her by the waist and lifted her so high that she almost kicked the poor boy in front of her while her legs hung two feet in the air, and then as soon as they hit solid ground again she found herself in Mike's arms, and he was leaning in to kiss her intensely before she could even take a breath. Yep, if anyone in school hadn't known about their relationship up until that point, they sure did now.

They got pushed apart by Lucas exclaiming "Let's go, let's go!" and pushing them all to move toward the stairs on the side of the stage, which they climbed up so that their fellow students could give them a round of applause. Once that was over with, they were spirited away to the nearest faculty office, which turned out to be Mr. Carr's (of course), where the representative from MTV would give them all the details they'd need to know for their meeting with Brock Sorenson.

Except, as soon as the group poured into the tiny office off the side of the gym building, the MTV PR guy blinked and arched his eyebrows high on his forehead. "Whoa, there's so many of you," he commented sounding surprised. He was a youngish-looking guy, probably in his early 30s, and dressed more stylishly than most people in Hawkins ever bothered with, which definitely made him stand out as a city person. "Why are there so many of you?"

"What do you mean?" Ms. Tanaka asked as she ushered them into the room, sharing the same confused expression all six of them were now directing at the man. "These are the winners of the contest! They got all the clues right before any other teams did."

The PR dude rested his hands on his waist as if that answer was unsatisfactory. "Yeah, but there's only supposed to be two of them," he declared in a tone like he was explaining algebra to a five-year-old. "That's the rules. I can only allow two of them to meet with Mr. Sorenson."

"What?!" Mike exclaimed.

"Are you serious?!" Max scoffed.

"The rules didn't say anything about that!" Dustin joined the chorus, and El figured he would know since he was the one who had read through the rules of the competition before the boys even teamed up with her and Max to begin with.

"I don't remember your people ever telling me anything about restricting the teams to two members each," Ms. Tanaka argued back in a slightly more composed tone, as expected from an adult who, when you thought about it, had no bone to pick in this fight. She still seemed to want to help them, though. "If you had mentioned that, we would've made sure the teams were within that limit. As it stands, nearly all of the teams that participated consisted of three or more students."

"Well, you're going to have to choose one of the teams that consisted of less than three," the PR man insisted, shaking his head. "It's either that or you six figure out amongst yourselves who gets to meet Mr. Sorenson. Those are your options because I only have two VIP passes to give you," he added, pulling out of his pocket two passes similar to the ones VIP guests and staff got at concerts, complete with brightly-colored lanyards so they could hang them from their necks.

"Can't you just make more of these?" Will asked, hesitantly stretching out a hand so the man could give over one of the passes. "This is literally just a laminated piece of paper," he added as he examined the trinket. "You could just go to Kinko's or something and get it done."

The man shook his head again. "Sorry, but it's not up to me. It was Mr. Sorenson's people that instituted that rule. He doesn't have the time nor the patience to entertain a whole horde of kids." He sounded like he was genuinely sorry about it, but the words still rankled. El couldn't believe that Brock would be so callous as to put a limit on how many "kids" he would have to "entertain." It almost made it sound like Brock didn't want to do this at all, like he was being forced into it or doing it solely for PR reasons. Surely it couldn't be like that, could it?

"This is *bull*," Mike threw out, a minute pause before the last word

indicating that he was barely restraining himself from swearing in front of their Guidance Counselor.

"Yeah, who says 'team' when they mean 'pair'?!" Lucas asked, crossing his arms with an annoyed huff.

"Well, look at it on the bright side: at least two of you get to meet Brock Sorenson," the man retorted, making it clear that any complaining was futile. "You just need to draw straws or something." He grabbed the second pass off of Will's hand and signaled to them to figure it out amongst themselves as soon as possible.

With no other choice but to comply or lose their prize altogether, Mike pulled out his deck of cards with a sigh. They'd each pick a card, and the highest two would get the VIP pass. It was a method based on pure luck, so no one was allowed to complain. Will picked a three, Lucas a seven. Max picked a king. Dustin picked a seven, too, and El picked a five. Mike, the last one to choose a card, picked a jack.

"Oh my *God*," Max breathed as she looked down at the card in her hand, her mind clearly blown by the fact that she was going to meet Brock Sorenson. She stared slackjawed at the drawing of the king for a few more seconds before lifting her head to meet El's gaze. Her expression dropped. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, moving forward to wrap her arms around her best friend. "I wanted you to be there with me," she added in El's ear.

"It's okay," El assured her, returning the hug. Sure, she was disappointed she wouldn't get to meet one of her favorite celebrities the one time she thought she had the chance, and she was upset that MTV had changed the rules on them at the last minute, but she wasn't about to begrudge Max this opportunity. It wasn't *her* fault. "Take lots of pictures and maybe get me an autograph. That'll more than make up for me missing it."

The two of them separated and El was quick to give the sad-looking redhead the most supportive smile she could muster. "You'll have a great time," she insisted, turning to nod in her boyfriend's direction, too. "And then you'll come back and tell us all about it so we can all be super jealous," she added with a chuckle.

Mike, who had remained quiet and still for the most part, showing no discernible reaction one way or the other to having won— certainly not as visibly as Max had— looked at El with an expression that seemed troubled. She was about to tell him not to worry about it when his gaze ducked down to the jack in his hand, and before El could open her mouth, he pursed his lips and abruptly extended his hand out to her. "Here," he said, meeting her gaze again as he handed her the card. "You take it."

"Whoa, Mike," Lucas exclaimed.

"For real?" Max asked with a gasp.

"What?" El's eyes widened. "No, Mike, come on." She shook her head. "You won fair and square. I can't take your spot."

"I want you to," he insisted, waving the card in his hand at her as if that would make it more likely for her to take it. "I mean, sure, I like Brock's movies and I think he's really cool, but I don't love him as much as you guys do. You two know *everything* about him. We never would've gotten this far without your help." He shrugged. "I'm okay with missing this if it means you girls get one of your dreams come true."

The silence was deafening as everyone processed what was happening, and El felt herself start to get choked up. No one had ever done anything this nice for her— well, her dad when he took her in, but no one *other than the person who raised her* had sacrificed something this significant just to make her happy. Because Mike knew how important this was to her and Max. Because he cared for her that much. Because he was that *good* of a person.

She felt tears prickle at the corners of her eyes and before they could spill, she threw her arms around him tightly and basked in the feeling of him returning the embrace for a moment, before pulling her head back and kissing him with as much emotion and gratitude as she could.

She was so preoccupied with expressing her appreciation for this *wonderful, beautiful* boy that she wasn't paying attention to anything else around them save for the feeling of her lips pressing against his,

but she could still hear the reactions of the people around them. There were scattered "awws" around the room, and an "Is this really necessary?" from the MTV guy that only made her push herself closer to her boyfriend and extend the kiss for as long as her lungs would allow.

"Man, I wish someone loved me *that* much," Dustin commented from behind her, and the quip was followed by several *whack*-like sounds and an "oww!" like one or more of the others had slapped him into keeping quiet.

They did eventually have to part for air and were not surprised to find everyone grinning at them when they did. Even Ms. Tanaka seemed mostly amused (El had totally forgotten she was around and couldn't help but blush when she realized she had basically jumped her boyfriend in front of a member of the school staff), but no one really got a chance to comment before the MTV PR guy pulled out the two VIP passes again and drawled, "So, it's gonna be the two girls, then?"

They had to stay in Mr. Carr's office for a little while longer so MTV dude could give El and Max all the details they would need to know for the meet-and-greet the next day, but the guys weren't about to go back to the gym on their own, so they hung around, and the girls wouldn't have it any other way.

By the time they finally went back to the Homecoming dance, the event only had about half an hour to go, but they didn't mind. Dustin, Lucas, and Will spent most of that time making a list of things they wanted Max and El to ask Brock Sorenson, which Max goodnaturedly humored. El, for her part, remained permanently attached to Mike in any way she could: Holding his hand, wrapping her arms around his waist, cozying up to his side the entire rest of the night, unwilling to part from this incredible young man that made her feel so many things in the best way possible.

.
. .
.

"El! You ready yet? You're gonna be late!"

El rolled her eyes; what her dad meant was that *he* was going to be late. Since El was going to be out of the house that night and he didn't have to "watch over" (and he used the term very, *very* loosely) a bunch of rowdy teenagers, her father had decided once again to take the opportunity to have dinner with Joyce. Only this time it really *was* a date, with the actual word spoken out loud and everything, and her poor father had been stressing out all afternoon.

Not that she had any room to complain, mind you. She had a pretty big afternoon coming up herself, and it showed in her room, which currently looked like the site of a nuclear showdown. The entire contents of her closet were strewn all over her bed, all her makeup containers were similarly in disarray on top of her dresser, and at least half a dozen pairs of shoes were spread out on the floor, to the point that she'd almost tripped on some of them at least twice while getting ready.

She normally wasn't this concerned about her looks, but today was important and she wanted everything to be perfect, so she'd decided to take her time. She'd spent the last couple of hours trying on outfit after outfit, hoping that being able to see all the options would allow her to choose one look and stick to it. Eventually she'd settled on a simple outfit— dark-wash jeans with a white blouse and denim jacket, and her trusty chucks— which made her feel a little bit more dressed-up than usual, but still comfortable and cute. Then she moved onto her makeup, which she kept fairly simple in pastel colors. She was pulling her hair up into a ponytail when her dad called out to her.

"I'm almost done," she responded, figuring there was no point in making her dad more nervous than he already was. Seriously, for someone who'd had his fair share of one-night stands (she heard things in town, okay? And she was pretty sure there were *reasons* why the librarian was so strict with them other than just Dustin being annoying), he sure was jumpy about going on one date. Then again... this was Joyce. Joyce was special.

Smiling to herself as she thought of how sweet that was, she turned slightly, so she could see herself from different angles on her full-

length mirror. She took a second to fix up a curl on the side of her head that had fallen loose from the scrunchy, but once that was done, she decided she looked good.

As she gave herself one last once-over, she caught sight of a pile of teen magazines on top of her dresser. She had dumped them there on Monday night after they found the answer to the last location clue, and completely forgot about them until now, but she couldn't help but look at them. The one at the top, a months-old issue of *Tiger Beat*, featured Brock Sorenson on the cover, in a picture from a professional photo shoot that had him from the chest up, wearing a tight white T-shirt that perfectly delineated his shoulder muscles, while he smirked at the camera with smoldering eyes.

It was Max's favorite picture of him, and one that was also used in the covers of several other issues on El's pile, if she remembered correctly. And El usually loved it, too, swooned over it often alongside her best friend, but now, when she picked up the magazine, all she could think of were the words *He doesn't have the time nor the patience to entertain a whole horde of kids* bouncing around in her recent memory.

She put the magazine down at the top of the pile and lifted her gaze, her eyes immediately finding the corkboard she had put up on the wall above the dresser and all the photos and mementos pinned on it. The most recent additions were the copies of the Polaroid photos they'd taken for the scavenger hunt, all pinned together, slightly overlapping, in a corner of the corkboard.

No matter which one she looked at, all she could see was the bright smile on her face, and on the faces of each of her friends. It was almost weird; she wouldn't have imagined that she could grow so attached to someone, let alone four boys, in such a short amount of time. But every time her gaze fell on their smiling faces, she felt a warmth inside her chest, like she couldn't imagine not having such joy in her life. Sure, each photo captured one happy moment in time — the elation of achieving something amazing— but for El, it was less about the scavenger hunt itself, and more about what came of it. Yes, they'd won the contest, but in reality she'd gained so much more than just a meet-and-greet with a celebrity; she'd gained four friendships that she hoped would last forever.

She stretched out a hand to touch her favorite out of all the pictures — the one they took at Melvald's with Joyce for their third clue—unpinning it carefully and bringing it closer to her face. Softly, she lifted a finger to trace the area close to the left edge of the picture, where she and Mike stood close together, hands firmly intertwined, her head on his shoulder, his face turned away from the camera so he could look at her with a smile.

The corners of her mouth curled up almost by their own volition. Just looking at Mike's profile in a photo made her heart start beating faster, and she was overcome with a yearning to be near him, to be able to hold his hand, run a hand through his hair, feel the press of his lips against hers. He always made her feel like she was precious, like she made him happy just being near him, and it was the single greatest thing she'd gained from participating in this contest. She wanted that. She just wanted to be with him.

Her dad knocked on the doorframe, poking his head into the room. "Ready to go?" he asked as he rolled up the sleeves of the striped shirt he was wearing. "You look nice."

"Yeah, all done," she said, leaning forward to pin the photo back on the corkboard before turning back to her father with a smile. "Thanks. Wait... no tie?" she asked with a curious expression, signaling to her dad with her index finger.

Hopper's eyes widened in alarm at the suggestion, one hand moving up to his buttoned-up collar. "You think I need one? 'Cause I could—"

El chuckled, amused. "Naw, I'm just teasing you. You're fine." She moved forward to unbutton the topmost two buttons of her dad's shirt so that it looked less like he was choking himself for the sake of fashion. "You and Joyce have known each other since you were kids. I think casual's good in this case." She finished her ministrations by brushing away imaginary dust bunnies from her father's shoulders. "You don't have to be nervous, Dad."

Hopper let his breath out with a puff. "Easier said than done," he muttered under his breath, but then shook his head, chuckling as if amused with himself. "Come on. We gotta go," he added, nudging her on her arm with his elbow before turning on his heel and walking

toward the front door.

"Can we stop somewhere on the way, though?" El asked hopefully as she turned off the lights and closed her bedroom door behind her, following her father out of the house. "There's something I have to do first."

.

.

.

One good thing about the scavenger hunt being over is that Mike could now reclaim his free time. He'd spent his early Sunday afternoon working on his schoolwork for the week, and once he was done with that he'd migrated down to the basement to work on a campaign. They hadn't played D&D in months and Mike hadn't even thought about it since the contest started, so now he was itching to play again.

He'd been at it for a couple hours already, his family recognizing the routine and leaving the basement alone for the most part, save for a couple of times his mother had to come down to put in or take out a load of laundry. Even then he mostly tuned her out, focused as he was on getting a good part of the campaign written down so he could give his friends little teasers of it through the week. He'd even written in templates for El and Max, in case they wanted to join in.

He was so focused on it that he started when someone knocked on the door. He frowned at it for a couple of seconds— most guests came in through the front door rather than through the basement, unless it was one of the guys, but any of them would've radioed him to let him know they were coming. So who could it possibly be?

He stood up from the table and took a second to stretch his legs, stimulating circulation as they'd started fallen asleep from sitting in the same position for so long. Once the pins and needles dissipated, he made his way to the basement door and peeked through the blinds. He was surprised to find his girlfriend there, wearing jeans, chucks, a soft-looking fitted white blouse, and her favorite jean

jacket. Her curly hair was pulled up in a high ponytail that swung from side to side as she moved her head, a familiar sight to him as he'd spent many an hour of class staring at the back of her head and daydreaming rather than paying attention to his lectures.

He opened the door straight away. "Hey," he said, surprised that she was here, but not surprised enough for his throat not to dry up by how beautiful she looked. After staring for a second too long, he looked down at his wristwatch for a moment before looking at her again. "Aren't you supposed to be on your way to the meet-and-greet right about now?"

She gave him a brilliant smile. "I gave my pass to Dustin," she admitted with an unconcerned shrug, like passing up on a once-in-a-lifetime chance to meet one of her idols was not a big freaking deal. "Can I come in?"

Mike stepped to the side to let her pass, but it was almost an automatic movement because his brain hadn't quite caught up to what she'd just told him. "You gave Dustin your pass?" he asked dumbly, like the words just couldn't compute in his mind. So much for his heroic sacrifice, huh? He'd given her his pass because he thought that would make her happy, and she'd turned right around and given it to Dustin. Was she... what did that mean?

She didn't seem to notice his confusion as she chuckled and made her way to the couch. "He promised to name his firstborn after me."

Mike stared at her in stunned silence for a heartbeat, almost hypnotized by the swing of her ponytail as she sat down, turning her honeyed gaze on him with a beatific smile. "You don't mind that I came over unannounced, do you? I just..." Her cheeks flushed adorably. "I just really wanted to see you."

It was that blush, more than anything, that made Mike realize he was being dumb. She hadn't given up her VIP pass because she thought his gesture insignificant; she'd given it up to come here, to his house. "You can come by whenever you want," he said, trying to ignore the sound of his heart beating in his ears at the realization. He shook his head and then spoke again. "So, would Dustin be naming the kid after Jane or after El?"

Her brows drew together adorably, like that particular conundrum hadn't even occurred to her. "I'm... not sure, actually," she admitted carefully, crossing her arms as if to punctuate her bewilderment. Her ponytail swung to the side as she cocked her head lightly. "I guess you'd have to ask him."

Mike laughed. Whatever her reasons for turning down the opportunity he'd earlier ceded to her, he was glad he got to see her today. "You're going to end up with a godson named Elvis. You know that, right?" he postulated between chuckles.

She thought about it for a couple of seconds before breaking out into a groan. "I am, aren't I?" she concluded, but by the end of the sentence she was shaking her head in obvious amusement. "That poor hypothetical child," she quipped, leaning back against the backrest of the couch.

Mike closed the door, which he'd only just realized he was still holding open, and moved into the room so he could sit down beside her on the couch. "So what brings you here?" he asked, wondering if her dad had dropped her off and why, then, he hadn't heard the chief's Blazer park outside his house.

"Well, since my plans for the evening fell through," she started in a bubbly tone, "I was thinking I could come hang out with you, instead. It could be our first official date. Maybe we could go watch a movie?" she suggested, resting her head against her hand as she propped it against the back of the couch.

That sounded good to him. They weren't going to be able to hold their campaign until the next weekend, anyway, so he had all week to get it ready. He was surprised that movies were her first suggestion for entertainment, though. "Really? After you've been so particular about what constitutes or doesn't constitute our first date, now you're going to go with a movie?" he had to ask, unable to resist teasing her a little.

She pouted at him, but her eyes reflected amusement, so he knew she wasn't really upset. "The movies are a perfectly good place to have a first date," she declared, mock offended. "At least at the movie theater we're mostly alone."

"We were mostly alone at the minigolf course, too," he reminded her smartly and chuckled when he saw her roll her eyes.

"All right, fine," she conceded with a huff. "If the movie ends up sucking, we can take it back and say that the minigolf course was our first date. There. Satisfied?"

"Well, really, I'm good with either," he said, raising his arms at his sides for a moment as if declaring his innocence. "Max will be thrilled, though," he pointed out, and was rewarded with her shaking her head at him. "But yeah, I'm up for a movie. Always happy to be your backup choice whenever, just let me put all of this away—"

He moved to get off the couch so he could grab his D&D binder, but before he could do so, he felt her pull him back down to a sitting position. "Hey," she said softly as he turned to look at her. "You're not my backup choice, okay? There's *nowhere* I'd rather be today than here with you."

She tugged him closer by the hand and he went willingly, twining his fingers with hers as he lost himself in her beautiful honey-brown eyes. He didn't know what made her give up the chance of a lifetime to meet one of her idols, but he believed her when she said she would much rather spend time with him. He believed her because he felt the same way. And knowing she shared those feelings made him feel... like he'd won the lottery. Like he was invincible. Like anything life threw at him meant nothing so long as he could keep holding her hand.

It was... impossible to describe, really, how light and how warm and how brilliant she made him feel when she looked up at him between her lashes like she was doing then. And since he couldn't put the feeling into words, the best way to let her know how much her words meant to him was to lean forward and capture her lips with his, pouring every single emotion within him into the gesture.

When their lips met, she let out a little gasp, as if the mere touch of his lips against hers sent a tingle of electricity through her, and he took the chance to deepen the kiss, pulling her closer by her waist. She melted into him with a sigh, her hand letting go of his to glide up his chest, tips of her fingers ever-so-slightly ghosting over the fabric

of his polo until it reached the sensitive skin of his collarbone, which in turn made *him* shiver. Her other arm wrapped around his shoulder and her hand got lost in his messy hair, and the angle was a little awkward because they were sitting sideways on the couch but still he did his best to pull her closer as they got lost in the moment.

They pulled back after a small eternity, and Mike would be lying if he said it didn't leave him feeling dizzy—in the best way possible—for a few breathless seconds afterward. "Okay," he said, once his heart finally came down from the high, "we'll go to the movies. Just let me tell Mom I'm going out, okay?" She nodded and he leaned in to peck her lips once more, just because he could.

Somewhat reluctantly he pulled out of her embrace and stood up, taking a second to close his binder and put it to the side before sprinting up the stairs to peek past the basement door and yell to his mother that he was going to the movies with El. She yelled back her agreement and Mike turned to make his way down the stairs in what felt like two leaps. El was already on her feet and waiting for him by the time he made it back to the couch. "All right, we're good to go," he said, throwing an arm around her shoulders so he could lead her toward the door. "You got any idea what you want to watch?"

"Anything as long as it's not a Brock Sorenson movie," she replied with a snort as she wrapped an arm around his waist and snuggled close to his side.

Mike laughed. "Too soon?" he asked, mirth coloring his words, as they crossed the threshold. He had to momentarily let go of her to close the door behind them, but his arm returned to its previous position straight away as they started walking toward his station wagon. "I think *Young Guns* is still playing at The Hawk," he remembered. "We might need to bribe the dude at the ticket counter to let us into the movie, but it can't be that hard; Dustin manages it all the time."

"That sounds like a plan, though I hope I'm not the one who has to do the convincing." She smiled mischievously at him as he opened the passenger-side door for her. "Thank you, sir," she nodded magnanimously as she got into the car.

He had to go around the front of the car to get in the driver's seat, but once he was seated comfortably, with his seatbelt buckled and the gear shift set in reverse, he turned to his girlfriend with an excited grin. "All good?"

She returned the smile, excited, and reached out to grab hold of his hand over the gear selector. "Never better," she replied, and as they pulled out of the garage and down Maple Street, he couldn't help but sneak glances at her as she sang along with the radio. Sure, the fact that they put in all that effort only to lose the chance to meet Brock Sorenson at the very end was a bit of a bummer, but as far as Mike was concerned, he'd won the grand prize as it was.

He'd never imagined, back when he and the boys first decided to participate in the scavenger hunt, that he'd end up finding something so much more special than just a one-off meeting with a celebrity. He'd never imagined that it would somehow lead to a relationship with the most amazing girl in the world, like instead of searching for clues, their hearts had been searching for each other all along.

Sometimes things just worked out for the better that way.

.

.

Notes: I was originally going to actually include a glimpse of the infamous Brock Sorenson in this, but about halfway through the story I decided that I really... just don't like Brock Sorenson, lol. xD I hope no one's *too* disappointed.

New Kids on the Block (NKOTB) were a late-1980s boy band that were basically the precursors of 90s staples like the Backstreet Boys and 'NSync. They disbanded in 1994 but came back for a reunion in 2007, which is still technically in effect. Fun fact: Mark Wahlberg was actually part of NKOTB for a couple of years (his older brother Donnie is still part of the band). Cyndi Lauper is an iconic pop artist who rose to fame in the 80s, most notably for her songs "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" and "Time After Time." The moonwalk is a dance move in which the dancer moves backwards while seemingly walking

forwards, made famous by Michael Jackson during a performance of his hit "Billie Jean."

Kinko's (or more recently known as FedEx Kinko's) is a US retail chain that provides an outlet for FedEx shipping, as well as printing, copying, and binding services. It's been around since 1970. *Young Guns* is a US western film starring Emilio Estevez, Kiefer Sutherland, Lou Diamond Phillips and Charlie Sheen. It opened in August 1988 and was in its last or so theatrical-release weekend around the time this chapter takes place. It was rated R.

And so we've come to the end of *Searching for Your Heart*! I hope you guys enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. I should let you know, though, that barring something big happening, you probably won't see much of me around here for... well, for a couple of months at least. I'm about to start a PhD program next month, and to do that I have to move literally to the other side of the world, so I won't have much time to write much of anything, or probably even read much fanfic at all. So don't worry if I suddenly disappear from these here lands, but please do tell me what you thought of this one. Hearing your thoughts always sparks new ideas, and I'll be making note of every idea I get for when I come back to writing. Here's hoping we'll have a season three trailer by then! Happy holidays, everyone! :)